

Title: Freedom And Not Peace.

Summary: AU of GoF, sequel to Comes Out of Darkness Morn. Harry Potter's life is split between duty and freely chosen responsibility, and as his dark dreams of Voldemort grow, it becomes a desperate balancing act.

Notes: Fourth installment of this AU, the Sacrifices Arc.

I almost didn't think I would make it this far.

Summing up what's happened to this point would take at least two pages. Suffice it to say that this won't make much sense if you haven't read the three stories that come beforehand. If you have, then you'll know what it means when I say that Harry has to deal with his brother, reconcile with his parents, argue with goblins, do his best to balance his blood family and his adopted family, and attempt to negotiate with former Death Eaters and unaligned Dark wizards in order to pull in a favorable result for the Light. And that's only the beginning of it.

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Updates: I archive on Fanfiction, Skyehawke, and my LJ, and send notice of updates through my Yahoo!Group. The addresses of all of them, and information about the Arc itself, can be found in my Fanfiction profile.

Warnings: Language, violence, messed-up psychology, heavy angst, character death later in this and the other stories, eventual severe gore.

In addition, this is the first story in the arc where a slash romance between Harry and Draco becomes a going concern. There is no explicit sex, and the story is not primarily a romance because, well, it can't be with so much other stuff happening, but if you can't stand to read a story with slash in it, go away now. Additionally, since this is an epic, there will be other pairings, het and slash, and probably at least one saffic (femmeslash) pairing, though they may not all show

up during Freedom and Not Peace. I'm not going to spoil them by saying who they involve. I haven't made up my mind on everything myself yet, so as to allow myself some freedom.

Sorry for the length of this introduction, but I thought it best to stamp out all the warnings in advance.

Ready? Let's go, then.

Freedom And Not Peace

Chapter One: Lux Aeterna

"This is the holiest time," James whispered. "This is the time of longest Light."

Harry's hands trembled as he clasped the little paper boat. He fought to still them. He reminded himself that he had chosen to come here, and that this ceremony was no different than the many pureblood rituals of the Dark wizards he had learned when he was a child.

But that was a lie, and Harry was getting better at realizing when he lied to himself. This was different. The pureblood rituals had never been something that he himself took part in during day-to-day life with his family. They had been exercises that he learned for the sake of winning his brother allies sometime in the future. This was a ritual of the Light, one that his own grandparents had celebrated, and his father as a child.

James looked almost like a child now, with his trousers rolled up above his ankles, as he took the first step forward into the gray waters of the North Sea, shivering at the waves' chill touch. The water shone like stone, Harry thought. Even the foam curling in to the sweeping amber sand of the Northumberland beach looked sharp, as though it were made of broken glass.

"This is Midsummer morning," James went on, his voice soft and solemn, "the moment when the sun shines in all its power, and magic can happen with its rising." He placed the boat he himself held gently on the water.

The first wave to come towards it seemed set to swamp it. It was such a simple little thing, Harry thought, the sides made of folded parchment, the mast a twig that James had broken from one of Lux Aeterna's yews, the sail a bit of brightly-colored cloth that had come from what James said was one of his childhood jumpers. James hadn't even waved a wand or incanted a spell to protect it.

But, inexplicably, the wave shied away from the boat and swept around it instead of over it. The next one went under it, and bore it up. Harry caught his breath. He couldn't feel the surge of magic that he would have expected, even the oddly directionless force that he associated with wandless magic, but there was something there, a faint golden glow that limned the boat. It grew brighter as Harry watched, and then the boat began to blaze like the sun. James let out a shaky breath. Harry darted a glance at his father. He was smiling.

"We sail our ships," he whispered, "to welcome in the sun, to salute it, as we once sailed out of the sun on a Midsummer morning."

Harry glanced at Connor, and found that his twin's eyes were wide. Connor obviously didn't know what to think, either. Harry flashed him a small smile, and then waded forward into the water and released his own boat.

The sunlight curled around it, and sent it skidding forward, away from the shore, following the path of James's boat. Harry watched as it bobbed and skipped. He could feel the magic reaching out to him this time, a purring warmth that slipped into his bones and took up residence there, as if his stomach had turned into its own cat.

Connor's boat followed his, nodding its mast like a head as it slid after the other two. Harry watched them until a shining gray wave took the three shimmering craft from sight. He was barely aware that his father had reached out and taken hold of his hand until he felt James tug gently at him, urging them both back to shore.

Harry walked as if in a daze. He could feel the sunlight traveling with him, lingering, exploring his bones with leisurely fingers. He had never been conscious of how bright everything in the world was.

When he turned his head, individual grains of sand flashed as if polished. The birds darting overhead were too brilliant to look at. Harry exhaled a little breath and put out a hand.

He would have sworn that a great warm tongue licked his palm before it vanished.

James looked faintly uneasy as they reached shore again, but nodded bracingly when Harry glanced at him. "The sun is welcoming you, that's all," he said. "Potters have performed this ritual for hundreds of years. This is just the summer and the sun and the light getting a good look at you."

"It tickles!" Connor complained abruptly, and Harry saw that his eyes, for once, weren't dulled with nightmares of Sirius's death or Voldemort's capture and torture of him. He was grabbing at his jumper, laughing and swatting, as if insects were biting him. "I've never felt the sun tickle me before!"

"You've never been here before," said James, his pensive frown passing away, "on this day, at this time." He grabbed Connor and ruffled his hair. "Dawn on Midsummer is special, like sunset. Aren't you glad I dragged you out of bed?"

"Not if it was just to tickle me!" Connor squirmed out of his father's grasp, and laughed again. "I didn't know that this would involve making everything so bright I couldn't see, and tickling!"

Harry sighed quietly in relief. He had been doing what he could to heal his brother, to quell his trauma, to make him see that there was life even after everything he had been through, but he hadn't achieved a result this dramatic. Harry thought the wind and the light had as much to do with that as his father did, though.

He glanced around again. The land around them was thick with birds and spray and the noticeable wind and light, but empty of people. The beach curved down to meet the sea like an extended hand. The sea roared in to meet it meanwhile, flinging its waves a good distance up the sand before trickling away between its fingers. The noise was constant, smooth, reassuring, steady as a heartbeat. Harry found

himself comforted to think that he could die, and still the sea would go on washing up on the sand.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up, blinking. Connor had run ahead towards the Portkey that would take them back to Lux Aeterna, but James was walking at his side, peering closely at his face.

“Didn’t you enjoy the ritual?” he asked.

Harry smiled. “Of course I did. It was wonderful to meet Light magic, in a way I haven’t before. I didn’t know that dances of any kind survived among the Light wizards. I’m glad they do.”

“You looked so...” James fumbled for a word. Harry waited patiently. They were new at this, all of them. It would do no good if he hurried his father along, through the very pause that might be part of the reason James was learning to trust him. “So intent,” his father said at last.

“I was thinking of Connor,” said Harry. “He’s much happier now than he was when we left the school.”

James stopped, fidgeting from foot to foot. Harry stopped, too, gazing into his face. He was somewhat startled to find that he didn’t have to crane his head back as far as he remembered. Of course, part of that came from not being around James for months at a time, but part of it was probably the growth spurt that James insisted he was finally entering.

“You know,” said James at last, every word a step on an eggshell, “that you can think of yourself, too? You can talk to me about anything that’s bothering you? I’ll help take care of Connor, Harry. I know you can’t stop completely. But I want you to have the chance to be taken care of, too.” He stared off into the distance. Harry wondered if he was watching Connor. He hoped so. Death Eaters were unlikely to attack here, but they were still outside Lux Aeterna’s wards, and accidents could happen. “Especially since Snape can’t visit you.”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I knew that might happen." Lux Aeterna's wards would accept Draco, who hadn't practiced enough Dark magic to make a difference to them, but a combination of Snape's Dark Mark, his magic, and James's dislike for him had made the Potter linchpin reject the Potions Master. Harry had promised to meet him at some point during the summer before they went back to Hogwarts, but right now he was still struggling to fit back with his family and learn new ways of being comfortable around them. And Connor still had at least one nightmare every night. Harry didn't think he could leave.

"You don't sound upset," James ventured, and finally met his eyes again. Harry was glad. It was easier to reassure people that he really was fine when they did that.

"I'm not," said Harry, with a shrug. "Like I said, I knew that might happen."

James was silent. He simply looked at Harry, and Harry let him look. His father understood him better after those silent, locked gazes.

"Are you going to let Hedwig fly from here?" James asked, when he'd apparently done his fill of looking.

Harry started, and then flushed. In truth, with the ritual and then his worry over Connor, he'd nearly forgotten that he'd brought his owl along, and why. "Yes," he murmured, and then hurried over to where the snowy owl waited, preening her feathers on a boulder and looking at the seabirds as though to say that she could outfly them all.

She perked up when Harry pulled a parchment from his pocket and bound it carefully to her leg. He spent a moment stroking her feathers, gazing into her golden eyes. Unlike the looks he shared with his father, his brother, and sometimes, it seemed, everyone else, this was an uncomplicated one.

"Hedwig," he whispered. "Malfoy Manor, girl, to Lucius Malfoy. It's his Midsummer gift."

Hedwig hooted her understanding, and clambered onto his arm as Harry extended it. Harry winced at the prickle of her claws, but spun and launched her into the air, the way that one should launch an owl at this point in the truce-dance.

Dazzling light spread around Hedwig as her wings caught the wind, her feathers glinting like the foam. Harry watched her as she turned south, towards Wiltshire, her pace precise and swift. She was out of sight in seconds.

Harry sighed, hoping the circle of light was a good omen. He had chosen his truce-gift carefully. It was the only one in the dance that he would initiate, given that Lucius had started this out by courting him. He had chosen to send a list of his own dearest ambitions and hopes, and what he perceived as his duties.

He wanted Lucius to understand what he would and would not do.

Draco would no doubt flush at the news. Snape would no doubt rail that he had been stupid. Even Narcissa Malfoy might raise an eyebrow. Harry was well-aware that she loved her husband, but did not entirely trust him.

Harry hoped that Lucius would respond with a similar list.

It's no good hating and distrusting people until they've proven beyond all doubt that they can be hated and distrusted, he thought as he accompanied his father back to the Portkey. If I'd done that in the past, I would have rejected Draco just based on his being a Malfoy, and Hawthorn and Adalrico just based on their once being Death Eaters, and I would have lost the chance to reconcile with my father and brother. It's better to ask, if you can, and see what they tell you. Harry hesitated, one hand on the door handle. After all, James hadn't forbidden him to enter this room. He'd just said that it might not be a good idea.

And Connor was peacefully asleep now, his nightmares calmed by a Dreamless Sleep potion, and James was at least dozing, if not outright asleep, and Remus was still recovering from the full moon.

And Harry was sick of dreaming of dark forests and a cold, high-pitched voice murmuring constantly of the sun. And his scar didn't usually bleed when he was awake.

Besides, he'd explored the rest of Lux Aeterna and found fascinating things—mirrors that only reflected pureblood wizards, windows that gazed into different worlds, rooms so perfectly proportioned that the light flooding them formed constructs like cathedrals with walls of sun and air. Nothing had harmed him. Harry couldn't see that this would be much different.

He did blink as a pulse of warmth hit him, but the door yielded when he pushed it, and nothing sprang out at him as he crossed the threshold.

Beyond the threshold, a wave of magic stopped him where he stood. Harry had never felt anything like it. He gazed at the structure in front of him, and understood why. No wizard, Light or Dark, had made this thing. It had come from...somewhere else.

The Maze was a glittering, overlapping labyrinth of tunnels, though Harry found it extremely hard to tell where one ended and another began, the same way that he found it hard to distinguish the ending of one sleeve when his jumper was sprawled on the floor. Light made it even harder to pick them out, wavering over the edges and the curves like a heat shimmer. Harry couldn't tell its color. Was it white, or silver, or gold, or something else? Perhaps it was the blue-white hue at the hearts of diamonds. Harry couldn't see the end of the Maze, but he could tell it filled almost the whole of the enormous room.

This was the structure his father had entered to face his mistakes, to learn what needed to be done for his family and his friends.

Harry felt the heat on his face, and could understand the why of that, too. This was Light as honest as a blade. Touch it, and it would cut you, but it would sear away all the impurities, too, and cut away the bruised and bleeding flesh. What was left would be scoured clean.

Harry didn't enter it. He wasn't that great a fool. But he walked carefully around the edge of the burning wards, and studied the Maze.

A few moments later, as the heat and the light focused and sharpened, he became aware that it was watching him back.

Harry blinked, and lifted his chin. So far, everything he had met in Lux Aeterna had not attacked him for the Dark magic that he had used in the past; his Potter blood had protected him. He was becoming aware that this might be the exception. He had imagined the Maze, but this was beyond his imagining. Just being in the same room with the Maze made him feel as if he were about to burst into a phoenix's cleansing flames.

A trill sounded above him, and Harry felt the Maze's attention shift, then relax. After all, the bird that had just entered the room was a creature of light. Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix who for some reason had abandoned the Headmaster and come with Harry, settled on his shoulder and rubbed his head against Harry's cheek.

Harry yawned. Sleep hadn't sounded at all appealing just a moment ago, and now it did. He cast a suspicious glance at Fawkes. Fawkes blinked one dark eye and sang a song of heat that blended into the warm rustle of blankets and the pleasant drowse of half-wakefulness at the end.

Harry yawned again. "I don't want to go to bed," he muttered, but he was being childish and he knew it.

Fawkes crooned, and Harry's eyes almost fell shut. He shook his head slowly. "I might wake Connor up if I went back now..."

The Maze abruptly reached out to him.

Harry froze, his heart banging hard and chasing away the spell of sleep Fawkes had tried to weave. Harry felt the light move over him, piercing, flickering, a few steps away from flame. Fawkes sat silent but respectful under it. Harry found himself remembering every time he had used Dark magic, every time he had hurt someone else even by accident, and especially the Walpurgis Night celebration, where he

had danced wildly among the Dark wizards and gone through a portal of blackness that was supposed to free him utterly.

The Light let him go. Harry blinked and pushed his glasses up his nose. The Maze was still watching him, but now it was an indulgent kind of watchfulness, the kind a mother might give to a favored child.

Harry winced, and wished that comparison had not occurred to him.

Behind him, the door opened. The burning wards around the Maze slowly expanded, herding him towards it. Harry sighed and went.

“I’ll just come back, you know,” he told the Maze.

The barely discernible hum in his head had a tone of amusement to it this time.

Harry huffed and went to bed. He hated it when people—well, that included magical objects—treated him like a child. But he supposed that if anything could get away with it, an enormously powerful magical artifact not originally of Earth could.

This time, he didn’t go to bed alone. Fawkes came along, the glow of his feathers muted when Harry hissed at him that he might wake Connor up, and perched on his pillow, and sang. Harry tried to resist, but his eyes fell shut, and he drifted away into a sleep that was dreamless, if one didn’t count the image of himself walking along a path of white thorns and glass roses, trying to find the one trail that would lead to freedom for everybody.

Phoenix song accompanied him all the way.

James’s hands trembled as he unfolded the parchment. He didn’t mind admitting it. Of course, it also helped that he was alone in his study, and there was no one else to see his hands shaking. This was a response to the letter he had written Peter the day after he brought his boys home to Lux Aeterna.

Peter hadn’t responded for nearly four weeks; this was the last day of June. James had been shamefully relieved. If his betrayed friend wanted to cut all the ties between them, that would be easier.

But he hadn't, as evidenced by this letter.

James took a deep breath, lowered his eyes to the parchment, and read.

Dear James:

I don't even know if I should call you that, since for the last twelve years you have been anything but dear to me.

James closed his eyes for a moment. If he listened to the boys playing with their friends beyond the window of his study, which looked out over Lux Aeterna's glittering sweep of front lawn, then he could pretend that Peter's letter was not there, and all the words that he deserved were not smacking him in the face.

You deserve them, he reminded himself, in a firm tone of voice that he thought he'd picked up from the Maze, and then looked back at the letter.

And yet that is not true, since, after all, I did go to Azkaban for your sake, and Sirius's, and Remus's. For twelve years, I stayed there for you. I told myself that you loved me, that you'd just been frightened, that you hadn't meant to betray me.

But you did. It hurt, James, even knowing that when it came down to a choice between me and your own family, of course you'd choose your own family. You chose Sirius and Remus over me too, though, and that hurt.

James found it hard to breathe. But it was better, it had to be better, than the pain he'd felt when he realized he'd been hiding from the truth all these years.

I decided at last that I didn't have any reason to stay in Azkaban any longer, no reason to honor a covenant with obviously false friends. I broke my phoenix web's grip by shifting it to another target, and focused on Harry. I promised myself that I'd protect him and keep him from being a sacrifice like I have been.

Dumbledore was wrong, James. Innocence isn't innocence when it's ignorance. Just to keep the whole wizarding world innocent of war, Dumbledore sacrificed minds and imbued them with a terrible knowledge. At least he had my consent when he did it to me. He never got Harry's.

That's what I'm going to ask for, James, as proof that you're telling the truth. Be a good father to Harry. If I hear that he suffered in your care, and you could have prevented the suffering, or you caused it, then I will consider you an enemy from now until the end of my life. I will slip in through any hole in your defenses that you can find. A rat can cause plenty of trouble before he's caught, James, and even a wizard is defenseless when he comes with enough friends. I know that very well.

If you can reassure me that you're going to be a good father to Harry, contact me again. If you don't write back, I'll assume you're the enemy.

Peter.

James carefully put the parchment down and sat back, staring at the ceiling. On the whole, it hadn't been that bad, he thought, aware of the numbness at the center of himself. He could do what Peter had suggested. He would write back. He certainly intended to be a good father to Harry. And, in a way, it was good that he had this threat at his back, so he wouldn't ever be tempted to slip and falter.

He just hadn't expected a letter like this from Peter. There had been bitterness in it, yes, but also a savage strength that James had never seen when they were students in Hogwarts together. Twelve years in Azkaban had changed him.

Or it was always there, and I just never took the care to see it.

And now he had the visual of gray rats swarming him in his head. He knew that Peter had a special connection with rats, could summon them and speak with them. He could certainly call enough to take

down someone else, and from the tone in his words, he wouldn't hesitate.

James stood up and wandered to the window, looking out over the vast lawn.

Ron Weasley and Connor were swooping about on their brooms, chasing the Quaffle that hovered and darted in front of them. Their laughter was audible from here. James hadn't minded at all when they asked him to Transfigure the lawn into a Quidditch pitch. It was simple magic, if strong, and it kept Connor satisfied. Connor needed time and healing, still, but his wants, as opposed to his needs, were fairly easy to tend to.

Harry...was a different matter.

James had to look around the lawn a few times before he could spot his elder son. Harry sat with Draco Malfoy in the shade of one of the yews at the edge of the grass. He was speaking with him, far too quietly to be heard from here. James narrowed his eyes. They didn't appear to be playing a game.

His gaze flitted back and forth from the flying pair to the sitting pair, and he shook his head.

He supposed he could dismiss the differences between the two friendships as products of the differences between his sons, or the boys they had befriended, or Light and Dark pureblooded wizards, or Gryffindors and Slytherins. But he still didn't know if that would produce so profound a gap. Connor and Ron were much the way he remembered himself and Sirius being—loud, strong as sunlight, boisterous as young lions, interested in Quidditch more than pranks but otherwise comparable.

Harry and Draco were so much quieter that it was unnerving. They did fly and play Quidditch together, and practice dueling spells together, and explore Lux Aeterna and commented on the artifacts together. (James had had to warn them away from several, including his great-grandfather's portrait, which had tried to hex Draco on learning he was a Malfoy). But they did it with an incredible intensity,

as though each moment would never come again, and Draco, at least, gave James a poisonous glare whenever they were interrupted, quite unlike the usual sulky protest of a child told he had to go home now. Harry would become more reserved instantly when he noticed his father watching them, but if he didn't notice, he smiled and laughed in a way that James had never seen or heard when Harry lived with them in Godric's Hollow.

James couldn't understand it, and that agitated him, because he thought it meant he couldn't understand his son.

The door of the study opened, and James turned and smiled at Remus. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Remus nodded and covered his mouth with one hand to hide a yawn. "Don't know what came over me," he said. "Stress, I suppose, or the combination of it and the Wolfsbane Potion."

James nodded. Remus had been unable to attend the Midsummer morning ritual with them because of the full moon, but even after it had passed, he had been more tired than usual, and spent long hours sleeping or wandering quietly by himself in the corners of Lux Aeterna. James didn't know—

Oh. Of course I do.

James winced. "Remus," he said quietly, "you do know that you can talk to me about Sirius."

Remus blinked at him.

"I've been remiss not to talk to you about it before this," said James.

"I didn't want to intrude," said Remus, turning to admire a portrait on the wall, though his tense shoulders said he wasn't admiring it at all. "I—you've been so busy with your boys, James, and Merlin knows they need every bit of attention that you can give them—"

"I still should have talked to you," said James. "I'm an idiot, Remus." He moved carefully up to stand beside his friend, and wasn't

surprised that the woman in the portrait, his great-aunt Mafalda, bore a strong resemblance to Sirius. The pureblood families had intermarried many times in the past, and there had been a time when the Blacks were considered prestigious allies, without the taint of insanity and Dark magic that had overcome the past few generations. Mafalda was peering hard at Remus now, as though trying to decide what to say to cheer him up. James knew how she felt. "You miss him, don't you?"

"Every damn day," said Remus softly. "He was—I'm still so angry at him, for not just telling us, the imbecile, that he had the Dark Lord in his head, and then I hate myself for being angry at him, and then I remember the pranks he used to pull and want to laugh, and then I'm angry at him again for making me feel so many contradictory emotions, and then I remember the way he died and want to scream." He lowered his head, his breathing careful and paced. James recognized the patterns. Remus had learned them while he was still a child, to control the wolf who thought his pain a grand game.

"I know," James whispered. In truth, he didn't feel much better, but he had simply been letting his grief for Sirius overwhelm him when he was alone at night, and sure that Connor and Harry didn't need anything from him right then. He hesitated for a long moment, then told himself, Looking stupid be damned, and pulled Remus into a rough hug. "I miss him every damn day, too. And the way he died is infuriating. The next time I see him, I'm going to kick his arse."

Remus laughed hard for a moment, and then tears spilled into his voice, though he didn't let them fall. James moved him over until they sat in front of the window, and positioned himself between Remus and the door.

"Now," he said, "tell me. Just tell me. Anything that you want to say."

Remus drew a deep breath and started talking. James found it easy to give Remus his full attention. He could rely on Harry to guard Connor, and Draco to guard Harry.

"No." Harry's voice was endlessly patient, Draco thought, even in a situation like this, where the person he was being patient at didn't

deserve the favor. "You didn't flick your wrist hard enough. Like this. Protego!"

The Shield Charm snapped up in front of Harry. Draco backed away a step, though in truth that still left him close to Harry. The spell was instant, effective, and very, very strong. The wild crackle of magic made Draco's hair stand on end, and seemed to bounce from point to point in the wide room, constantly illuminated by crossing beams of sunlight from the enormous windows, that James had given the boys to practice in.

Draco didn't mind. That power smelled like roses, where once it had pained him. He loved to watch Harry practicing magic, even when, as now, he had to use his wand so that someone else could imitate him.

He just wished that Harry didn't have to be teaching his brother.

Connor Potter stood on the other side of the room, watching Harry with a frown of concentration. He held his wand out in front of him and said, without much conviction, "Protego."

The wrist flick was still wrong, Draco saw in exasperation, and the Shield Charm failed to materialize. Connor scowled. "I'll never be able to do it," he declared.

"Of course you will." Harry gave his brother a smile that made Draco feel sick. Harry was very far from the blind idiot he'd been where Connor was concerned a year ago, but he still had too much of himself tied up in the prat, Draco thought. He should pay more attention to those who were really concerned with him, like Draco, and should certainly not calmly insist on practicing with his brother when Draco was there, just because it was part of his daily routine.

"Do you really think so?" Connor glanced up, searching out Harry's eyes for reassurance. Draco scowled and folded his arms. Connor had just turned from asking Sirius for protection to asking Harry. And Harry gave it, and gave it—poured more and more of himself down the endless dry well that was Connor Potter. Draco had to struggle to retain his composed mask when he thought of it.

"Of course I do," said Harry, his voice low and soothing. "A powerful wizard is nothing without will, Connor. He can practice and practice, and not rouse the tiniest spark from his wand if he doesn't really want to. Or he can cast the most dazzling spells, and none of them will be what he really intends, because he doesn't know what he really intends. You're faltering now because of a lack of will, but you don't have to. You know what's at stake. You know that we have to do this."

Connor shivered, then raised his head and nodded. Draco blinked. This wasn't the first time Harry had said something like that, but it was the first time the words had worked so complete a transformation.

"I remember the Shrieking Shack," Connor whispered.

That was another thing that drove Draco mad. Harry had told him what happened in the Shack, but it wasn't the same as having been there. That was obvious every time the twins traded glances. They shared some special depth of experience that Draco didn't. Connor had access to part of Harry that he didn't.

Harry glanced back at him abruptly. "Are you all right, Draco?"

Draco blinked, realizing he'd almost let his own magic get out of control, and shook his head. "Fine."

Harry studied him for a moment more, then nodded and turned back to Connor. "Like this," he said, voice strong and confident. "Protego!"

Connor echoed him, his voice as self-willed, and this time gave the right wrist flick

A thin shield encased him. Harry laughed aloud. "Excellent, Connor! You'll have to work on making it stronger, still, but you've got the will, now, and you know what you need to do. I think even this shield will stand up to hexes." He gestured carefully with his wand. Draco knew Harry had to hold himself back as if on chains in situations like this. He was so much more used to using wandless, raw, wild magic. "Petrificus Totalus!"

The hex shot towards Connor and bounced off his shield. Connor's smile widened, and he broke into a spontaneous jig. Harry laughed again.

"Now that you can do it, we'll start working on building the shield stronger," he promised his brother, "and other defensive spells."

Connor grinned at him. "Tomorrow?" he asked, patting his stomach. "I'm starving."

Harry nodded. "I'll let you go—for today," he said, in a mock threatening tone, and Connor laughed in turn. "It must be near dinner, anyway. But we'll work on this tomorrow, and every day until you can do it perfectly."

Connor nodded. "I know," he said, and bounced off and through the door.

Harry turned to Draco the moment he was gone. "He is getting better," he said.

Draco lifted his chin. "You don't know that I was about to say anything about that."

"Yes," Harry pointed out, "I do."

Draco sighed. "Fine, Harry. But I want to know—when are you going to tell him that you're holding back on him?"

Harry's eyes slid away from his. Draco grasped his chin and tilted his face back, the way he had in the hospital wing when Harry had tried to deny that Draco loved him.

"You are," said Draco gently. If he played his cards right, he might be able to win Harry free of his commitment to teaching his brother. Surely James Potter could do it. He should. Connor was his child. "You're too powerful for these kinds of games. You know it. You can demonstrate to him how to cast spells, but you don't make a good opponent for a duel. You could destroy him at any time, and block

any spell he casts, and you don't want to hurt him anyway. He'll only improve to a certain point, and then he'll start thinking that he's much better-prepared than he really is. Get someone else to train him. Your father, maybe, or Professor Lupin. They're nearer his match in power."

"I said that I would teach him," Harry whispered. "I said that even at Hogwarts, and it didn't work very well there. I need to make up for that. And there're still plenty of things I can teach him that don't rely on magic. Pureblood rituals, history, etiquette, leadership..."

"Harry." Draco decided that he might as well give Harry the full message that his parents had communicated to him before he left the Manor to visit Lux Aeterna. He hadn't wanted to, thinking the words too harsh for Harry's current worldview, but Harry needed to hear them. "You can teach him those things, yes, but he doesn't need them nearly as much as the magic. If Voldemort comes back and Connor's the one to defeat him, fine." Draco couldn't keep the skepticism out of his voice. He truly didn't think that the Dark Lord was going to fall at Connor's hand, ambiguous prophecy or not. Harry was so much his brother's better that it was impossible to conceive of. "But that doesn't mean he's going to be a leader. You are. You have to be. You know that there are wizards keeping an eye on you for your power, and they'll be looking for signs of your true intentions soon. That's what my mother was doing as Starborn, making sure that there are some wizards cautiously sympathetic to the possibility of a third side, not Voldemort's or Dumbledore's. She can only do that because you're—well, you. And sooner or later, you'll have to become the leader of that third side. My parents are willing to follow you if you become that leader, you know."

That last fact had impressed Draco the most. He didn't know what Midsummer gift Harry had sent to his father, but he did know that Lucius had been stunned and shaken for a day afterward, and then gravely thoughtful. And his mother, his mother who had never bowed her head to Voldemort, never got her arm branded with the Dark Mark, had smiled when Draco asked her about Harry and said, "He won't be a Lord, dear. He will be something much greater than that. And he shall have my loyalty until the day he shows that he can't become that person anymore. I don't expect that day to come."

“I don’t want to give anyone orders.”

Draco blinked, and came back from his dreams of the future to find the Harry of the now facing him, his arms folded and his eyes hard and his face shut.

“I don’t want to compel anyone,” said Harry. “And I don’t want to order anyone around, either. If I can ask them to do things, fine. But I won’t command them, Draco. I won’t.”

“You’re not going to be a Lord,” Draco tried.

“I don’t care.” Harry stepped away from him, and Draco was almost instantly irritated, as he always was when Harry got so far away from him. He tried to calm down, not let it show in his face. “They would still expect me to tell them what to do, wouldn’t they?”

Reluctantly, Draco nodded. His mother had made that point to him. She had done what she had done so far to make the world a safer place for her son and to fulfill a debt she owed to Harry, but sooner or later she would come to a place where only Harry’s power, backed by wisdom, could safely guide her. She would look to him then, and whatever name Harry gave what he told her, advice or commands or something else, she would still be obeying.

“I don’t want to,” said Harry. “I’ve been a slave. I would never wish that fate on anyone else.”

“If they choose it, they’re not slaves,” said Draco. “Merlin, you’re frustrating.”

Harry shook his head. “I prefer to make bargains and debts and sacrifices, Draco. I understand those. As long as I can be of use to your family, as long as I can give something in return for any aid I get, then I’m happy enough. But don’t ask me to become some kind of—”
“ He waved his hands, obviously searching for the right word. “General,” he spat at last, and strode towards the door.

“Harry,” Draco whispered.

Harry heard it, and stopped, though he didn't look at him.

"There might be times when the bargains have to be very general, or you can't reach someone to ask their opinion," said Draco. "You've studied war. You know that. Are you really going to refuse to lead just because you might hurt someone's feelings, or make them feel briefly like a slave?"

Harry looked back over his shoulder. "I told you about being vates."

Draco nodded, bewildered.

"I don't see how I could be both the kind of leader that your parents want me to be and vates," said Harry. "Not when one is about commanding, sometimes without thought, and the other is about knowing myself so deeply that I'll be instantly aware of when I'm giving a command, and hammered by disgust for doing it. The magical creatures have been hurt enough by their bindings, Draco. I can't let myself get used to putting bindings on wizards. I'll rely on the pureblood rituals, which someone won't use unless they have full knowledge of what it entails, and bargains. If I can't return aid for aid, equal help for equal help, then I won't make the bargain."

Draco paused. What he had to say next sounded foolish and naïve, but he needed to say it.

"I think you can be both, Harry," he said. "If anyone can, it's you."

Harry blinked, obviously startled, then gave him a wry grin. "It's nice that you have such faith in me, Draco, but I think I'll probably have to choose, and I choose to be vates. I'll leave free choice open to the wizards, too, though they don't need as many nets removed. Just the nets that make them so blind and stubborn," he added, in an undertone.

"But what if someone chooses to obey you?" Draco asked. "Would you really deny that decision and force your own will over that person's will?"

He hated the way the question made Harry's smile vanish, but they needed to consider this. Harry needed to consider this, at least. Draco watched him struggle with discomfort squirming in his gut. He wished he could hug Harry and say he understood, but he didn't. He knew where he stood, where he would always stand.

Harry was the one who needed to make the choice.

"I don't know," said Harry at last, in a subdued tone. "I guess not."

Draco knew when to back off. The scent of roses in the room was nearly overpowering, as Harry's magic reacted to his upset. He smiled. It wasn't hard to do, now that the prat was gone. "Well, you don't need to choose right now. Do you want to go back and explore that secret passage in the attic?"

Harry perked up immediately. "Yes!" He opened the door that led out of the room and glanced around a few times. "But we'll have to be careful," he whispered. "Dad told me there was a ward on that door for a reason."

Draco blinked. He didn't remember a ward. "What ward?"

Harry swallowed. "I, uh, kind of destroyed it because it wouldn't let us in," he admitted. "But I'm sure that there's nothing there that will hurt us."

"Of course not," Draco said, reminding himself to be on guard, just in case.

Harry gave him a wild smile and dashed out of the room, heading for the attic—quietly.

Everything is so hard, Draco complained to himself, as he followed Harry through the sunlight of Lux Aeterna. I wish it wasn't this hard. But at least I'm here, and I can make sure that he doesn't overtax himself, or ignore important decisions, or make stupid ones. And that's enough.

And if it's not enough, I'll make it be enough.

Interlude: A Flurry of Letters

June 30th, 1994

Dear Peter:

I assure you that I intend to take good care of Harry. I don't know if you want me to swear an oath, since the last ones I swore were hardly kept. But I will, if you wish me to. Simply name the terms: by Merlin, by magic, or anything else.

Harry is healing, I think. He's thrown himself into teaching his brother. I've tried to get him to slow down and relax when I think he needs it. He doesn't take to that very well. The more I watch him, the more I realize my son has never had a true parent. In some ways, he's learned to compensate on his own. In others, he hasn't, or he's missing the presence of his guardian. His dislike of 'restrictions' such as eating properly and going to bed early makes me think that he's still not learned to care for himself.

I've asked Harry what he wants. That sometimes does me good, but not often. What Harry says he wants is time with his brother, and honesty from me, and for Draco Malfoy to visit him. Nothing else.

If you have any advice that you can give me, Peter, I'd be grateful. You saw more of him this year than I did. And it's not just your threat driving me, before you make that insinuation. I really do want to be a better father to my sons. Nothing else is more important to me right now.

James.

July 1st, 1994

Lily:

I don't really know what to say to you, so I'll put my words on the parchment and hope that you can make them out. You always used to be good at that, back at Hogwarts. I'm wondering how much of the

woman I knew after Hogwarts was real and how much an illusion, so I'll go back to what I knew was true.

Do you want to see our sons again for any other purpose than using them in the war? That's the question I need an answer to before I can let you see Connor again. The other decision isn't yours, but Harry's.

I've asked Connor. He went big-eyed and quiet, and then admitted that he misses you, but he's afraid of what would happen if he saw you again- if you would try to control him or tell him that he couldn't have his own life or see Harry again until Harry was properly under control.

Maybe that's the second question I want an answer to. If you do want to see our sons again for any other purpose than just making them sacrifices, then what would you say to them? You can write it out. I can't promise to show it to them.

And yes, before you can ask, I love you still. That doesn't mean I can bring the boys back to you yet. I can't.

James.
July 1st, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I hope you're well, sir. I've investigated the possibilities of your coming through to Lux Aeterna by Floo and Portkey, and I'm afraid that the wards block them both. Lux Aeterna is entirely sealed off to the world for some people, and entirely open to others. James says that he can't lower one set of wards, and he certainly can't change his dislike of you when he doesn't know you very well at all.

Could you perhaps write to him, sir? That might help ease the lowering of the barriers, and permit you to come to Lux Aeterna in time.

I'm very well. Connor is improving in leaps and bounds. Lux Aeterna is fascinating—not as fascinating as Dark magic or Potions, of course,

but it has many treasures, and hidden corners I didn't know existed. I've met my grandparents and great-aunts and other relatives through portraits. I've learned that the Maze James was in compelled him to honesty, so I trust his intentions more now. I've celebrated Midsummer by launching boats into the dawn from a beach in Northumberland. I'm slowly starting to feel at home here. It isn't a feeling I've felt very often before, so it took me some time to analyze it. Of course, Draco claims that I felt at home at Malfoy Manor, but I don't know. I was so tense the first time I was there, for Christmas, and then I was largely broken last summer, and the people around me were more important than the place.

Please don't tell Draco I said that, sir.

I've read the books you sent me, and I had a few questions. Is it really true that Calming Potions can't be improved? Why? The book just made a flat statement about it, which I don't think very wise. It seems as though the addition of a few violet petals should not only make them last longer, but also taste better. And I was thinking that perhaps a few more violet petals in the Wolfsbane Potion wouldn't go amiss, either.

I was wondering whether I couldn't make a potion that would mimic the effects of the Disillusionment Charm. Oh, I know that I'm very far from being able to make a successful potion of my own, but the theory is sound, I think, sir. Can you take a look at my list of notes on this other parchment and tell me what I should do to brew it?

Why are Beetle's Eye Potions orange?

I promise, sir, that I will arrange to visit you before we come back to Hogwarts. Perhaps at Diagon Alley?

Harry.
July 3rd, 1994

Dear Harry:

Do not think it escaped my notice that you said nothing in your most recent letter about your nightmares, which I know that you are still having, as you also made no comment about the vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion I sent you not being needed. Nightmares like yours are a serious matter, Harry. If I find out that you have been having them still and not reporting them to me, you will be in Occlumency training for the entirety of this next year.

How frequent are your nightmares? How long do they last? How many do you have a night? What common images occur in them?

I am glad that you are feeling at home in Lux Aeterna. However, never forget that James has been weak before. I do not trust him. If he makes a single motion that you interpret as threatening you, contact me at once. The second owl I will send comes with books on wards. Even old houses such as that Potter wreck often have unsuspected weaknesses in the wards. I wish you to know what they are, both for reasons of your own safety and so you will know what you must attack if I ever need to come through.

I trust that Mr. Malfoy is making you rest and spend some time on yourself as well as your brother. I will write him, and if I find this is not the case, you will meet me in Diagon Alley next week, so that I can assess your condition.

To answer your questions:

Calming Potions cannot be improved by the addition of violet petals, or indeed in any other way, because their base is stagnant. That is what makes them work, but it also means they simply absorb the extra ingredients without any effect. There have been numerous experiments to improve them over the last twenty years. Nothing has ever worked. There are already violet petals in the Wolfsbane Potion. Why do you feel the need to add more? Has the wolf been threatening you?

Your notes on your Disillusionment Potion still lack answers to several basic questions. What mixture of demiguise hair and liondragon scales would possibly be stable enough to bear the addition of yet more ingredients? What would you do to protect

yourself from the explosion of fumes that would follow your seventh step? How would you prevent the potion from becoming inert when you had added the lacewings' bodies?

If I find that you have been trying to brew this potion on your own, I will not wait for any meeting in Diagon Alley. You will come back to Hogwarts with me for the summer, and you will have detention from then until next summer, as you obviously cannot be trusted with the safety of yourself and others.

Beetle's Eye Potions are orange from the addition of the tiger's-eye stone, Harry. You should have known that.

Be happy.

Professor Severus Snape.
July 3rd, 1994

Dear Draco:

I know that you have been visiting Harry regularly at Lux Aeterna. I would like you to give me a description of his condition, in particular focusing on his nightmares, his eating habits, and how much time and attention he spends on his twin.

Professor Severus Snape.
July 4th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

Harry is happy, though I think it's thanks to me and not that miserable father and brother of his. (Professor Lupin helps, sometimes, but Harry doesn't spend that much time with him). He laughs and smiles when I see him. He'll explore Lux Aeterna and fly with me as readily as he'll talk with me about history or the pureblood customs or the war that's coming. I think he's finally learning that he can say anything to me, and it doesn't matter; I won't judge him or turn my back on him for it.

He seems to be sleeping relatively well, though he won't talk about his nightmares (all right, then, there's still one thing he won't talk with me about). He eats well. He's not thin or starving or anything like that.

He still spends far, far too much time on his twin. He trains Connor in dueling spells every day, at the same time, whether or not I'm there. Sometimes I visit, and he's just sitting and listening to the prat babble on about Sirius Black and nodding, as though Harry were just a listening ear and not an equal sufferer. I've tried to talk to Harry about that. He shrugs, and says that he's done a lot of his mourning, and the best way for him to heal is to listen to other people talk about it. He drives me mad.

I think the most disturbing thing is that Harry still doesn't have any clue about the impact his magic is having on the wizarding world. He thinks he can get away with, I don't know, just tossing power at people sometimes, and they'll nod and give him the aid he asks for, and then that's the end of it, a bargain for a bargain. I've talked to him about it several times, and now I understand. It's a combination of things. He doesn't want to be a Lord like Dumbledore, and asking someone else to do something without giving something immediate in return, or swearing an oath back to them, strikes him as Dumbledore-ish. He doesn't feel as much awe of his magic as we do, because, of course, he's living in the middle of it, and doesn't know just how much joy it causes for other people. And he still has trouble conceiving of himself in any important role that draws other people's attention, as opposed to some shadowy fighter whom no one really knows exists. That's his mother's training, I'll bet.

But it doesn't matter. He's still Slytherin, and I'll still visit him every other day, and I'm going to make sure that he doesn't suffer for lack of Slytherin company. I'll take good care of him, sir, for his sake and for both of ours.

Your gracious student,

Draco Malfoy.
July 4th, 1994

Potter:

Your son thinks I ought to write to you, in the interests of lowering our enmity. I am unconvinced that this is the best course of action. So long as I loathe you, I cannot enter Lux Aeterna, but the boy will also have a protector who is looking out for his best interests, instead of your own.

Nevertheless, Harry asked me to contact you, and I have done so.

Professor Severus Snape

Potions Master of Hogwarts.

Head of Slytherin House.

July 6th, 1994

Snape:

Loathing me is not the best course of action. Neither is loathing you, I admit. For example, if you were here, perhaps you would be able to tell me why an explosion has just destroyed the anteroom that I'd let Harry set up as a Potions lab. He's fine, but the anteroom is completely covered in orange slime.

James Potter,

Master of Lux Aeterna.

July 7th, 1994

Potter:

Harry added other ingredients to a mixture of demiguise hair and liondragon scales. Let me through the wards. I told the boy I would punish him if he attempted to make this potion, and I have the right to do so, as his legal guardian.

Snape.
July 8th, 1994

Snape:

You don't get it, do you? I can't just lower the wards like that. They depend on my loathing of you, and that is quite intact, thank you.

Harry has long since been punished. You forget that, while you're writing letters from Hogwarts, I'm in the same house with him. He has apologized, though he did say specifically that he was not attempting to use demiguise hair and liondragon scales, but some other mixture of ingredients. I've forbidden him to work on potions for a week, and he meekly accepted that.

Speaking of which, I found a vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion in his bedroom, one that Connor hasn't been using. I'll thank you to stop sending Potions to my son which I haven't approved.

James Potter.
July 9th, 1994

Potter:

You are a fool. Did you even check his lab for remnants of demiguise hair and liondragon scales? Or did you simply accept his word? Have you checked on the lab since you demanded that he stop working? Harry is a Slytherin, Potter. He is quite capable of agreeing on the surface, and pursuing something that he really wants to do under it.

I have sent the Dreamless Sleep Potion to Harry because he has been suffering from nightmares, quite savage ones, from the brief descriptions he sent me at the beginning of summer—nightmares that make his scar bleed. I trust that even you can grasp the importance of that. If he has been using it, then he has managed to escape into peace for a time, and I hope that, as the man who denied peace to him for such a large part of his childhood, you will not begrudge him this.

You may send another letter, but I shall not answer it. It is obvious that you are still an acrimonious child who cannot be trusted to look after children. I shall find some way to remove Harry from your care.

Professor Severus Snape.
July 10th, 1994

Harry:

It has occurred to me that while I cannot come to you, you might easily come to me. If you were to leave Lux Aeterna's wards and give me details of a point outside of them, I could easily Apparate to you. Then you could spend the rest of your summer the way it should be spent, with Slytherin companions who do not depend on you to train them and make allowances for them.

Professor Severus Snape.
July 11th, 1994

Snape:

You can't take Harry away from me, not if he doesn't want to go. And I've investigated the lab, thank you, and found no trace of either demiguise hair or liondragon scales, and no sign that Harry's been working in it this past week.

James Potter.
July 13th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I'm sorry, sir. I don't think leaving the wards would be a good idea. There are still Death Eaters abroad, and one of them might manage to trace me if I leave the wards for long. I'm told that my magic is rather distinctive.

Besides, there is still the same problem there always was if I am to spend the summer with you. You will not accept Connor, and my brother has to come with me. I'm just making progress in training him, and helping him to recover from the loss of Sirius. I'm not going to abandon him half-healed just because I might, possibly, have made a mistake with a potion, which was not the Disillusionment Potion, but a different one.

Thank you, sir, for your solicitude. My father is planning to bring us to Diagon Alley at the end of August; I don't know the exact day yet. But when I do, I'll write to you, and we can certainly plan to meet.

Harry Potter.
July 15th, 1994

Snape:

Damn it, answer me, you bastard!

James Potter.
July 17th, 1994

Harry:

It seems that, as you are intent on thinking the best of those with you, and that they need more healing than, in fact, they do, another form of proof is needed. Enclosed please find the letters that your father has sent me in the past few weeks. In the latest one, he descended to impugning my parentage. Once you have read them, perhaps you will agree that it is best for you to leave a house in which the man who calls himself your father makes no effort to do what is really best for his son.

Professor Severus Snape.
July 18th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I've read the letters, and talked to my father about them. He showed me the letters that you had sent him in return.

I'm not going to say they were worse than his. They were about the same, really: the writings of a man who cannot get over a childish grudge, who claims to love me but, really, doesn't seem to show it.

I understand that you may not be able to heal this enmity overnight. Do know that I am asking you to try. If you cannot, then, please, simply be satisfied with meeting me at the end of August, as I will send you no more letters.

I can see your face now, worrying over whether James will be receiving equal treatment to you. Oh, yes, he will. Be assured. I am perfectly capable of ignoring someone even though he lives in the same house with me.

You were plaguing me with questions about my feelings, I believe, sir, earlier in the summer. At the moment, I am coldly furious with both of you.

Harry.
July 20th, 1994

Dear Harry:

I have taken a few days to consider the matter, and I have decided that you were right. Please forgive me.

I am unhappy with having you so far away, relying on second-hand reports—even yours must be considered second-hand reports, because I do not have the evidence of my own eyes to balance them with—of your health and safety. I do not want you to destroy yourself. That has nothing to do with your being James's son, a pawn in any game I might wish to play against him, or a Slytherin I think is powerful and magically talented. It has to do with your being Harry.

I do not want to lose you, and knowing I cannot be there to help protect you is driving me slowly mad.

Please, stay safe. I will plague you with no more questions about nightmares if you do this for me. Do not brew dangerous Potions. Do not venture outside the house's wards; I was wrong to encourage you to do so. Spend time on your own healing, as well as your brother's. Do nothing to antagonize anyone who might hurt you.

I ask you to do these things, because I can do nothing else right now.

Professor Severus Snape.
July 20th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

I understand how hard it was for you to write that letter, and I accept your apologies.

I am staying safe. I have written down a list of my nightmares, which I'll enclose and send to you, though in truth they're so disjointed that I don't think they mean much. The Dreamless Sleep Potion has been helping.

Draco visited yesterday, and managed to coax me into letting Remus take over Connor's training session. I hate to admit it, but I think it may have helped both of them. Remus has been feeling more or less useless ever since we came here—not wanting to intrude on the bond that James has been rebuilding with both of us, but not knowing what else to do with himself. And Connor...damn it, Draco was right—

Excuse me, Professor Snape. Draco would not stop laughing when he read what I'd written over my shoulder. Getting him to shut up was in order.

I'm not going to repeat it. He can see it. Connor needs someone who won't hold back with him the way I tend to do. Remus knows how to

teach someone. It's working fine, and Connor was even impressed when they were done.

Of course, Draco didn't let me watch them for very long. We went flying, and then I introduced him to the Maze—it just watched him—and then I got your letter.

You are my legal guardian, and I want you to stay that way. I know it's hard trying to write to the wizard who saved your life. But, even given that both of those things are true, other things are also true. James is my blood father, and he wants to be a father in affection, too. I want that. I never want to choose between you, but if it came down to a choice, then it would lie with the one who had the most commitment to making my life easier. Right now, both of you are making it very hard by not even making an attempt to get along.

But I do trust that you will try. Thank you.

Harry.
July 21st, 1994

James:

I am impressed that you wrote back. I didn't think you had it in you.

I have taken time to think over what sort of advice I ought to give you about Harry, and my best piece is not to trust everything the boy says about himself. I know that you might be inclined to accept what he is on the surface and not look any deeper, but you have to. Harry knows a great deal about the world, and almost nothing about himself.

Watch him. Note the way he reacts to things, even when he doesn't realize he's doing so, or when you might be tempted to consider the reactions trivial. You could probably name a dozen things that Connor likes, foods or sweets or games or Quidditch teams, without even trying. Can you say the same about Harry? If not, start building up the bond.

Be honest with him. He's been lied to enough in his life. He has to know that when someone says he loves him, he really means it this time. Otherwise, he'll give chances, and give chances, and get hurt in the meanwhile, until he finally cuts that person out of his mind and heart. And remember, James, I hear that you've hurt him, and you'll have a bit of a rat problem.

Don't try to make him reconcile with Lily. He doesn't have to. He doesn't need her any longer. I know you love her, but Harry doesn't have to.

Be respectful of the people who did manage to make a dent in his heart—Snape, the Malfoy boy, his brother.

Make sure you speak with him about Sirius. I have no words for how horrible that was, James. I miss him, too, the stupid, stubborn son of a bitch. And I was the one who went to Azkaban for him. I can't imagine what Harry must be feeling. Sirius was his godfather, and Harry hadn't got to the point of cutting him out of his mind and heart yet.

I suppose the ideal thing to say would be for you to find a balance between your sons, but I really do think that Harry needs more attention. Don't let him fob you off, or distract you by referring to Connor. I saw him do that a few times when I was in the school to watch over him. He knew that other people would want to talk about Connor because he was the Boy-Who-Lived, or because they disliked him, and he would get that person to start thinking about Connor and stop paying attention to him. That's a relic of Lily's training, I think.

I don't know about rebuilding our friendship yet. For now, I'll take these letters, to discuss a boy who's been hurt enough in his life, Merlin knows.

Peter.

July 23rd, 1994

James:

I want to see the boys. Please. Can't I talk to them? And you, as well? Don't you miss the house at Godric's Hollow? It was our home for so many years. I do love you, and them, and miss you, and them.

Please, come back home.

Love,

Lily.

July 25th, 1994

Dear Lily:

I'm sorry. You didn't answer either of the questions I asked you. I can't let you see them. I think it would be best if we stopped writing for now.

James.

Chapter Two: Spiders on a Dead Web

“Dad, why doesn’t Lux Aeterna have house elves?”

James blinked and looked up from his bowl of beef stew. Harry was frowning intently at him from the other end of the table.

“Because we don’t need them,” James replied, sipping at his spoon again. “You must have noticed by now that our food just appears, the way that it does at Hogwarts, and yet we don’t have house elves around?”

Harry frowned. “I should have,” he said, his voice subdued. He leaned back in his chair and stared around Lux Aeterna’s dining hall. The walls were pierced with half a dozen windows on either side, not that that was unusual; in this case, they let in the late summer sunlight. James sometimes wondered whose bright idea it had been to hang mirrors among the windows, to bounce and reflect the light. Probably his grandmother Matilda, he thought. She was always searching for ways to declare the family’s new, formal allegiance to Light in symbolic terms as well as in her words and actions. “But I was focused on Connor.”

James glanced carefully around the hall, despite the fact that he knew Connor had gone outside to practice with Remus in a duel. Perhaps now was a good time to speak with Harry about his devotion to his brother, when Connor had no chance of overhearing them.

“So, why not?”

In a minute, then, when he can be persuaded to leave the subject of house elves, James promised himself, and finished his stew and pushed the bowl away. It vanished in a moment. Harry eyed it, then looked at him.

“We don’t need them,” James explained, leaning back in his chair. “We were able to persuade brownies to work for us a long time ago, and they take the place of house elves.”

Harry shook his head slowly, his eyes bearing the glassy look that James knew meant he was searching his head for memories. “I don’t know much about brownies. Why did they agree to work for us?”

“Brownies live in colonies,” James said, smiling slightly at how much he sounded like his grandmother. Matilda Potter had been so anxious to make the family Light in every conceivable way, and she had delighted in telling the tale of how she had got free-willed but calm and domestic servants to anyone who would listen. “The colony nearest Lux Aeterna was kidnapped by goblins one day, all but their king. He appealed to my grandmother—that would be your great-grandmother—“

“I know,” said Harry, his voice bearing just the hint of a snappish tone.

He doesn’t like to be treated as if he’s stupid, James noted to himself. See, Peter? I’m watching him. “He appealed to my grandmother for help,” he continued smoothly. “She not only got his colony back, she worked spells to insure that no goblins could ever kidnap them again. He offered her a service in exchange for her service, and she asked him to care for Lux Aeterna, with the help of his colony.”

“I wondered why nothing was ever dusty here,” said Harry, looking around the dining hall at the faint golden-brown gleam of the rich wood. James himself wasn’t sure what kind of wood it was, only that the trees didn’t grow anymore. “I didn’t think you’d had time to clean the entire house by yourself, even during the months you were hiding.”

James nodded. “The brownies aren’t like house elves. They delight in cleanliness, so they’ll wash our clothes and cook our food and clean up our dishes and so on, but they don’t much like wizards, and they certainly aren’t subservient.” He winced, and massaged a faint scar on his hand. Trying to trap a brownie engaged in cleaning up wasn’t the smartest thing any child could do, even a wizard child who already had his wand. “So they work for us, but they stay out of our way, and we stay out of theirs.”

“And the Potters let their house elves go?” Harry surmised.

James nodded. "What made you think of it?"

Harry stared at a point above his head, reminding James of a Kneazle kitten he'd had when he was seven. "I can see the web," he whispered.

James actually turned to look at the ceiling, where it seemed Harry was staring, but could see nothing. He frowned. "What do you mean?"

Harry didn't respond. When James turned around again, Harry was rubbing his eyes. He sighed, and said, "I can see the bindings on magical creatures. The webs that tie house elves to our service, for example, and the webs in the Forbidden Forest that bind unicorns to be less dangerous in their beauty, and the web that tied the Dementors to Azkaban." He looked at James. "I told you about that."

James nodded slowly. He'd gone to Harry when he received the first Ministry letter complaining that they no longer had any reliable means of keeping the prisoners at Azkaban, excepting anti-Apparition wards and wizard guards. James had so far fobbed them off by pointing out that, so far as he knew, freeing Dementors and sending them home into nightmares wasn't an actual crime. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was scrambling among the obscure laws, trying to come up with one that they could charge Harry under.

The latest letter was something of a puzzle, there. It reassured James that Harry wouldn't have any more trouble until the Ministry could actually find the forms that it required to charge him and fill them out, in triplicate. It hadn't been signed, but Harry had given a fleeting grin when he'd seen it.

"Well, I can see the webs that used to tie house elves here, but they aren't engaged," said Harry, and waved his hand. "They're just—floating in the air. I can't describe it, really. They're torn and tattered, and they shine gold, like threads of silk from clothing." He shrugged. "So I figured some other kind of magical creature had to be doing the cleaning."

He shifted to look at his father, and James just barely swallowed a gasp. Harry's eyes were burning. It was a look that James had never seen on him, and one that he couldn't connect to what he knew of Lily, either. It seemed this expression of ferocious, bloody-minded determination was Harry's alone.

"Why couldn't everyone do that?" he asked, with a tone in his voice that might have been anger or simple passion. "Why can't everyone call on a colony of brownies to clean their houses, instead of enslaving house elves?"

James blinked. "Harry, house elves aren't enslaved. I told you, brownies are very different. House elves welcome their service—"

"I spoke with one of them," Harry interrupted him. "He said that house elves have multiple webs on them, and one of them makes it impossible for them to rebel."

James frowned slightly. He was missing something here. He had to be. "Harry, you said that you wanted to be vates."

Harry nodded, eyes never blinking. James winced. Facing a stare like that for long was enough to make sweat pop out on his forehead.

"But you didn't say that you were trying to become it," James continued. "I didn't know you were having...well, conversations with house elves, and learning history that's not normal wizarding history." Freeing Dementors is one thing, they were dangers to everyone and should have gone back to nightmares long ago, but can he conceive of how much things would have to change overnight if he were to free house elves?

"I am," said Harry. "There was a prophecy, Dad, Connor's prophecy that he told you about."

James nodded again. He'd wanted to understand everything about the night that his boys had faced Sirius, possessed by Voldemort, and nearly died. The Maze had shown it to him, but hadn't been able to tell him what Harry and Connor had felt.

"I thought that prophecy applied only for that one night," he said.

Harry shook his head and then leaped to his feet, pacing back and forth. "No," he breathed. "It was about the first decision I'd make as a vates, the one decision that set the path for all. I asked the Dementors what they wanted me to do. They told me. I refused their first suggestion and bargained them down to a different one, going home into nightmares. But now I need to start thinking about the other magical creatures." He turned to James. "I probably should have thought about it before now, but I was busy with Connor."

James leaned forward. I meant to address this, and he got me side-tracked again. Harry has a habit of doing that. "Because you're no longer training your brother in dueling spells doesn't mean that you need to sacrifice yourself to some other cause, Harry," he said. There, those words sound right. "You don't have an obligation to think about freeing magical creatures."

"It's not an obligation," Harry murmured. "It can't be, or it would be against the nature of what being a vates is. It's something I want to do."

"Why?" James asked. Harry had explained what a vates was and what it had to do with webs and how he had freed the Dementors, but he had never explained why his own desire ran so strongly to this odd task. "What do you hate so much about the bindings on magical creatures?"

"That they're there," said Harry, and his face shuttered around his burning eyes. "I was a slave, and I don't see why anyone else should have to be." James felt the burgeoning buzz of his son's magic, which to him had always seemed the smell of the sea. "And you didn't answer my questions. Why doesn't everyone do a service for a colony of brownies, instead of enslaving house elves?"

"Brownies don't live everywhere," said James. "Northumberland has the largest population of them left. They don't do well in crowded wizarding environments like Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley. Even the ones here were happier when no one else lived in the house, I think."

Harry, you have to see that it isn't as simple as switching brownies for house elves."

Harry laughed. James flinched. It wasn't the kind of laugh his son had been giving lately, contented and free with Draco, or even muted the way it was in the presence of other people. It was wild, and bitter, and it ended with Harry snorting and muttering, "I long ago realized that nothing is ever simple."

He shook his head when James started to stand up in concern. "I really am fine," he said quietly. "Just tired. And worrying on this. I shouldn't worry on it, I know. I should start sorting out solutions. I think I'll go read a book that might tell me how. Thank you for telling me about the brownies."

He slipped out of the dining hall. Frowning, James stood, and watched as the last remnants of their dinner vanished with brisk efficiency.

He was halfway up the stairs to his study when he realized that Harry had deflected him, once again, from asking about how Harry spent his time and poured himself into what he perceived as his duties. "Hello, Hermione."

Hermione dusted off her hair as she stepped out of the fireplace and nodded to Harry. "That was different from any Floo trip I've been on," she said. "Did you know that there's something in your fireplace that makes you wait while it examines you and decides to let you through?" It had been an ugly face, which fixed red eyes on her. Hermione had frowned back, trying to decide if it was a gargoyle. She had been almost disappointed that she didn't have longer to study it when it abruptly whirled her forward again.

"Is there?" Harry looked startled. "I haven't traveled by Floo since we got here, and I didn't notice that."

Hermione shrugged. "You probably have it easier because you're a Potter." She rummaged in her bookbag. "You should see the histories I've brought along, Harry, your family's in almost all of them. A

Reasoned Discussion of Light Wizards. Tactics of the Firestar Wars. Fighting Dark Lords: A Beginner's Guide. I think you'll enjoy them."

She glanced up to find Harry watching her with a faint smile on his mouth. "What?" she snapped, fiddling with her hair. She knew that the Floo journey tended to disarray it, but she didn't see how she was supposed to keep it straight when she was spinning through fireplace after fireplace and brushing her head against their roofs and covering herself with soot.

"I've missed you, Hermione, that's all," Harry said, and moved forward to give her a hug. Hermione hugged him back, and glanced around. The room where he'd met her seemed to be kept as a sort of welcoming room. It had a few murals on the walls, but only simple chairs, and nothing that encouraged guests to linger. "Connor's downstairs," he added, drawing her gaze to him.

Hermione blinked. "Not up here with you?"

"He's playing Exploding Snap with Ron," said Harry, falling into step beside her as she headed for the door. This was more like what she had expected a grand old pureblood house to look like, Hermione thought, as she studied the door. The door was intricately carved oak wood, with a creature that resembled both a griffin and a dragon writhing around whorls of sunbursts. "He didn't know you were coming," Harry added, and that drew Hermione's attention from the door.

"I thought he invited me," she said.

"No. Um. I did." Harry hesitated, then turned his hands up. "I wanted to see you, and I know that you wanted to see Lux Aeterna," he finished.

Hermione frowned and folded her arms. I think we better straighten some things out right here and now. "Is he still my friend, Harry?"

"I don't know," said Harry, running a hand through his hair. "I think so, but I don't know how things stood between you at the end of the year."

“Awful,” said Hermione crisply. Her mind tossed her memories of countless uncomfortable nights in the Gryffindor common room, where Connor sat on one end of it, she sat on the other, and Ron shuttled back and forth between them with a desperately unhappy expression on his face. “He sort of apologized, but never properly. And he was always muttering about you all the time.”

“You know why, now,” said Harry, his voice pleading.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Harry, I can’t forgive him that easily,” she said. “I had to pry the story out of him step by step.”

“But what he went through was awful,” Harry said.

“And what you went through was awful, and yet you never did the same kinds of things to me,” said Hermione. She tapped her foot when Harry just looked at her in incomprehension. She knew Harry was smart, but sometimes he could be awfully dense about things like this, though he was still better than his twin. “I’m still angry, Harry. He had every chance to patch things up with me, and he didn’t.”

“Well, maybe now he can?” Harry made it a question, leaving it up to her.

Hermione sighed. She’d thought that the invitation was from Connor, and represented an extended hand that she sorely wanted. She wasn’t sure how she felt, knowing that Harry had been the one to arrange things for his twin’s best benefit, as always.

Then she smiled. Well, I’ll just arrange things so that Connor can’t lean on Harry this time.

“I’ll talk to him,” she agreed. “Alone,” she added, and stole Harry’s own widening smile.

“Um, I’m not sure—“ Harry began.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. There’s such a thing as going too far. “Harry James Potter,” she said. “Your brother’s nearly as old

as you are. I'm sure that he can make up with me without you there to hold his hand."

Harry's face abruptly flushed, but to Hermione's shock, he didn't yell at or disagree with her. "That's just what Draco said," he whispered. "That I do too much sticking up for him, too much interfering for him. He's kept saying it, over and over, these past few days."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. She didn't like having anything in common with Draco Bloody Malfoy. On the other hand, he hadn't called her "Mudblood" once in the last few months they were at Hogwarts, which she supposed made him—all right. Not any less of an enormously arrogant and obnoxious prat, but all right.

"Yes, I think you do," she said, keeping her voice gentle. "So let me talk to him, Harry. Alone."

Harry nodded, and opened the door.

They emerged onto a balcony that extended out over a wide, sweeping hall. Hermione caught her breath. She didn't think that she'd ever seen such a lovely, gracious old place. The walls didn't actually spiral inward to settle around the floor, but it felt that way, because of the spiraling grains of the wood. Everywhere she looked was gold—not actual gold, but reflected sunlight from cunningly placed mirrors. Windchimes rustled with delicate music in the breeze through the windows. They weren't made of silver, as Hermione expected, but a delicate amber-colored material. The lower portion of the walls was done in a mural of scalloped wings, curling around the floor.

In the center of it, Ron and Connor were playing Exploding Snap, and laughing their heads off.

Hermione felt her heart lighten and lift when she saw them, for all that it was probably, at least in part, the effect of that beautiful room. She was glad, really, that Connor looked happier than he had in those last few miserable weeks at school. Even from here, she could see that his face was flushed with merriment, and somewhat tanned from time in the sun, and his eyes were much brighter. And Ron looked content

as he hadn't when he was trying to keep every second person from asking Connor what had happened and how Sirius Black had really died.

But they were still infuriating.

Connor paused, his gaze drawn by their movement on the balcony, probably, and froze when he looked up and saw her. Hermione gave him her most threatening glare in return.

Ron stood up when he saw her.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Ron had acted like she was about to hurt Connor for at least half the time they were at Hogwarts after the incident with Sirius Black—which meant the times he was on the far side of the common room with Connor. If he'd spent enough time with him this summer, he'd probably forgotten about all the reassurances Hermione had given him, reassurances that she really did want to make up with Connor.

"I think we should go down," said Harry, and guided her to the stairs. Hermione followed him. Ron's fists were clenching, and his face turning red. Connor just watched her. His own face looked pale, but resolute.

Harry halted in front of both of them and met Ron's gaze. "Hermione wants to talk to Connor privately," he said. "So let's let them."

"She'll hurt him," said Ron, and gave her a suspicious glance. Hermione managed to refrain from rolling her eyes again, but it was a near thing. She reminded herself that Ron was just being loyal, and Connor had probably needed that this summer. "He's just starting to recover, and—"

"It's been more than two months, Ron," said Harry, so softly that Hermione wasn't convinced his brother could hear them. "If he hasn't started to recover now, then it's time to pull off the scab."

Ron stared hard at Harry for a moment, then at Connor. Hermione looked at him, too. He'd wiped his face clean of expression, though.

Ron said, "Well, what do you think, mate? Do you want to talk to her?"

"I think I have to," Connor muttered.

"That's not an answer—" Ron began.

"Yes, it is." Harry took Ron's arm and hauled him away, meeting Hermione's eyes over his shoulder for a minute. "We'll see you when you've made up, Hermione. Or when one of you comes storming out of the room, I suppose." He flashed her a faint smile, then led Ron to the far side of the hall and firmly out a door there.

Left alone with Connor, Hermione put her hands on her hips. "You never did really admit that you were wrong," she said evenly.

Connor listlessly turned over one of the Exploding Snap cards he and Ron had been playing with, and then jumped as it exploded. "But I did," he said. "I told you what happened. I am sorry for saying what I did to you, and not really making up with you, Hermione." He stared at her. "What else do you want me to say?"

"That you won't do it again," said Hermione. "And then start acting natural around me again. If you really did think you apologized, why were you looking at me the way you did when I came down the stairs?"

"You can't possibly have seen the expression on my face from that far away," Connor objected, standing up and turning slightly away from her.

"Yes, I did," said Hermione. "And now tell me why you were looking that way."

Connor took a deep breath and moved his hands in front of him, clenching and relaxing on different parts of his arms. It was a gesture Hermione hadn't seen him make before. She suspected he'd been trained to do it by someone else, probably Harry. "I know that eventually this summer will end," he whispered. "I know that

eventually I have to go back to Hogwarts and face everyone else. That's going to be hard. Harry's told me how most of the school regarded me by the time the year ended, and I was too blind to see it. But...do I have to face it now, in the middle of the summer? I didn't really want to talk to you, Hermione, and that's why."

Hermione tapped her foot again. It's only too obvious that he's used to leaning on other people to do his thinking for him. That'll have to stop soon. Harry's not always going to be there, and neither am I. "Think of this as practice," she said. "You only need to face one person instead of hundreds. And if you can't face the one person, then you need lots more practice."

Connor turned around slowly. "But how do you get past that?" he whispered. "Are you really capable of forgiving me?"

Hermione snorted. "Of course. I forgave you for that business with compulsion in our second year."

Connor's face reflected confusion for a moment. "I thought you did that by thinking my compulsion gift was good, part of the Light."

Hermione stared at him. "Of course not. I still think it could be nasty, and Hogwarts, A History classifies it as a Dark gift and talks about the Blacks who had it and the nasty things they did with it." She restrained herself from telling a story about Orion Black and how he'd compelled the professors of Hogwarts into doing a jig in the middle of the Great Hall. Connor probably wouldn't understand the comparison, and he'd probably never heard of Orion Black, either. "But I got past it by forgiving you."

Connor nodded slowly.

Hermione cocked her head to the side. "Is that the way you get past wrongs that others have done you? By considering them part of the Light?"

Connor laughed, but it was too loud.

"You do, I think," said Hermione. A few things she'd heard during the last few weeks of the term now suddenly made sense. "You were able to forgive Sirius because he died heroically. You were able to forgive Harry because he fought to save you. And you don't see how anyone can forgive you, because you've been thinking about what you've done, and you can't make it sound good or like it was part of the Light."

"Leave it, Hermione," said Connor, voice gone suddenly tight.

"No," said Hermione. "Not everyone thinks the same way as you do, Connor. I really forgave you for compelling me. And I would forgive you for being a prat, if you would just tell me things like this, that you're afraid I'm going to carry around a grudge against you no matter how much you apologize. Didn't anyone ever tell you it's better to tell people these things?"

"Sirius said not to," Connor whispered, "that it was a weakness my enemies could use against me."

"And was this before or after he was possessed by You-Know-Who?" Hermione inquired.

"I don't know!" Connor let out a frustrated shout, and Hermione sneezed. His magic was rising around him, not as strong as Harry's, but still thick. "I don't know how to trust what he told me, how to forgive him, sometimes, for not saying that he just was possessed."

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head. "It would have all been a lot easier if you'd just told me this."

They stood in silence for a few moments, while Connor's level of power dropped down from dramatic.

"So you do forgive me?" His voice was unsteady now.

Hermione peered at him hard. His eyes were hopeful, bright and endearing, the eyes of a small dog that Hermione's neighbors had once had, which begged for sweets the same way.

Trouble was, Hermione had always got bitten when she put her hand near that little dog's mouth.

"I can forgive you if you make an effort to actually forgive other people," said Hermione. "And stand and learn on your own. I think you've been hiding here." She hesitated for a moment, then forged ahead. "And have you spoken to Harry at all about his version of what happened in the Shrieking Shack?"

"He said it was settled," said Connor. "That he didn't have nightmares about it any more." His eyes reflected envy of that.

"Oh, Connor," said Hermione, feeling both exasperated and sorry for him. It would be hard being stuck with a brother like Harry, who hid everything that was true of himself as a matter of course. "I don't think so. Harry would say anything if he thought it would spare you further hurt. Talk to him, all right? And then when you come back to school, watch him. See how he forgives people. He certainly doesn't have to think they're part of the Light to do it. It can give you some good training in tolerance and compassion."

"I keep making promises to do things," said Connor. "And then people say I don't fulfill the promises, no matter what I try." He looked as mulish as Harry could, for a moment, but it passed quickly. He let out a deep breath and met her eyes squarely for the first time in the conversation. "But I want to try this time."

"Good," Hermione said, and put out her hand. "Friends again?"

Connor grasped her hand firmly and shook.

"Good," Hermione repeated, and turned towards the door at the far end of the hall. "We can tell Harry that neither of us will be storming out of the room."

She was glad that was all settled. When she talked to Harry again, she would have to ask about the history of this house, and the difference between Light and Dark pureblood rituals. The books she'd found on the subject had all been surprisingly reticent, as if neither side wanted to commit too much of themselves to paper.

Maybe I can even borrow books from their library!
“How are you doing, mate?”

Harry blinked and looked away from the scene of Lux Aeterna's lawn that he was contemplating beyond the window. He had expected to stand in silence with Ron from the beginning of Hermione and Connor's conversation to the end of it. Ron didn't generally say much to him beyond quick, embarrassed comments that attempted to include Harry in his and Connor's conversations.

But now he was leaning on the wall and watching Harry with that chess-player's look on his face that Harry had seen once before, when he told Harry about the magic he radiated, which other purebloods could sense.

Harry shrugged. “What context do you mean it in?”

“Only you would want a bloody context,” Ron muttered, but he didn't really look upset. “I mean, do you still have nightmares? Connor looks all right, really, but what about you?”

Harry blinked, then smiled slightly. Ron was attempting to express concern for him. It was...endearing, if only because it was so completely different from the way a Slytherin would have. Draco would have charged ahead, asking questions and making assumptions until Harry was forced to correct him. Snape would observe him in silence and pop out with the correct answer later. Ron just asked, and his face was already going red in embarrassment as the silence stretched and Harry didn't answer.

“I'm fine, really,” said Harry. “No more nightmares about Sirius.” And that was true. His dreams still remained the disjointed, rambling things they had been all summer, full of thorns and plains of ice and a voice murmuring about the sun, how it rose and set and had the earth turn about it on the solstices and equinoxes. He noticed Ron's expression lighten, and decided there was no need to mention the other nightmares, especially when he didn't understand them himself. “Why are you asking?”

Ron rubbed his face with one hand. "Well, you're really important to Connor," he muttered. "And I don't know you much, and sometimes we haven't got on much. I thought I should ask."

Harry cocked his head. "So you can see both of us being important to Connor for a long time?"

"Yeah, something like that." Ron didn't sound as though he'd worked it all out in his head, and he drew his wand. Harry straightened, but Ron didn't seem to notice. "Would you mind dueling with me on a few spells, mate? Something to pass the time. I know nothing I do can hurt you."

"All right," said Harry, and pulled his own wand out. A few spells insured this room was right for dueling, including practice mats and Shield Charms on the walls. Ron watched admiringly. Harry glanced back at him. "What kind of spells would you most like to learn?"

"Something embarrassing," said Ron. "Something I could actually hit Fred and George with the next time they humiliate me."

Interested, Harry peered at Ron. He would have to see what Ron's level of power was, to see if he could ever match the twins no matter what spells Harry taught him. The twins were very odd, magical geniuses who also had a latent ability to deflect most low-level spells aimed at them. The ability manifested most of the time as a simple missing of the hex, which bounced past them and gave Fred and George a chance to retaliate. Harry knew the twins were some of the strongest wizards in the school, right below Hermione, but he didn't know anything about Ron's magic.

He blinked. Well, that's odd.

"What's the matter?" Ron demanded. "Why're you looking at me like that?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "There's a block on your magic," he said. "A level it can't rise past. It looks like a lid on top of a box full of light." He broke out of his magic-seeing and glanced at Ron. "Do you know what that is?"

Ron looked crestfallen. "Yeah," he muttered, scuffling a trainer on the floor. "Bill cast a hex at me when I was seven, and Charlie cast one at the same time. Somehow, they collided in me and...formed that. The mediwitch Mum took me to said that it had to heal on its own, and until it did, my magic would be restrained. I kind of hoped it would have gone away by now, though. I mean, it's been seven bloody years." He scratched the back of his neck. "I don't know, I was really angry when the hexes hit me, and she said it might heal if I could be calm."

Harry smiled. "I don't think you can do that."

"No, me neither," Ron agreed, and lifted his wand. "Unless you think you can heal it?" His face and his words were full of ill-guarded hope.

Harry peered once more at the block. It sat firm and strong, not a web to his sight, but a seamless lid. "Sorry, no."

Ron sighed. "Well, just teach me what spells you can teach me."

Harry showed him the Apis Occaeco hex, which caused the victim to feel as though invisible bees were stinging him all along his wand hand. Ron yelped and dropped his wand, but agreed it was a good one, and even got most of the wrist flicks and pronunciation right when Harry corrected him a few times.

Harry studied Ron as he once again triumphantly repeated Apis, but faltered on Occaeco. He was a good friend to Connor, that was certain. And he was a Light pureblooded wizard. Harry understood a few more things about them, now that he'd spent time in Lux Aeterna.

And I understand more things about my family than I ever cared to.

Harry jumped. That voice hadn't been his. "Regulus?" he whispered. Ron looked at him curiously.

Yes. Did you think I'd gone away forever?

I wondered, Harry said, even as he said aloud, “No, Ron, slight lifting of your voice on the second syllable of Occaeco.” I hadn’t heard from you in a long time.

I went to try and find out where the bloody hell I am, and I won’t ask you to pardon me, since I hear you use worse language all the time. And it didn’t work. All I really know is that I’m in some small and dark place, and the worse pain Voldemort tortured me with hasn’t come back.

So, not much more than before.

No.

Well, I said that I’d help you get free, and I will, Harry promised him. I—

“Apis Occaeco!”

Harry jumped as the sensation of stinging bees coiled around his left hand. He didn’t drop his wand, since that was in his right, but he did nod to Ron and have to shake away the sting. “Impressive,” he said.

“I got you!” Ron looked gleeful about his success, one moment away from jumping up and down.

Harry nodded again. “Yes, you did.” And that was a lesson, Harry. Never let yourself be too distracted, even by private conversations in your head. Someone might sneak up and kill Connor while you’re involved in a chat.

“That was fun,” said Ron contemplatively. “We’ll see if I can’t do it again.” He raised his wand.

Hermione and Connor knocked on the door just then and came in, so Harry didn’t have to let Ron do it again, or admit out loud why he had jumped. He did see Connor shooting him concerned glances, so he managed several reassuring smiles. He was busy listening to Regulus, though, and trying to figure out from the very limited descriptions he was able to give if he could help.

Well, let's start with the smallness, he said at last, since I don't think I can help much with the darkness or the pain right now.

All right, Regulus said sulkily. I want to see the sun again.

You can see it through my eyes.

Not the same thing.

Harry agreed that it was not, and began naming off a long checklist of small places that Regulus might be crammed into, while Regulus tried to decide if they sounded like they matched his prison. Harry showed Hermione the library, had dinner, and evaded another of his father's ridiculous bouts of being too concerned about him while he was doing it.

No one seemed to notice. It was easy, really, Harry reflected, to hide what was going on in his head.

Harry blinked. He wasn't used to owls waking him in the middle of the night, especially not owls who pecked him on the cheek to deliver their letters. He sat up slowly, stretching his arms, and called Lumos with a wave of his hand, so he could see.

Who's writing you? Regulus demanded.

I don't know, Harry said, and blinked further when he saw that there were two more owls lined up on the windowsill. Three. What do they want with me?

To deliver letters.

I knew that, Harry pointed out, even as he relieved the eagle-owl sitting on his bed of its burden. If I have to have other voices in my head, they should at least think thoughts I wouldn't have.

Regulus sniffed and retreated.

Harry glanced down at the letter he held in his hands, smiling slightly as he recognized the handwriting on the outside of the envelope. Ripping it open, he studied the message.

Dear Mr. Potter:

I am writing this as a request for a formal meeting. I would like to come and see you on your birthday, and of course Draco wants to come with me. I shall bring my sister, Andromeda Black Tonks, with me, as well as her daughter, Nymphadora Tonks. They are both interested in meeting you, and Andromeda may wish to enter into an alliance.

I await your owl.

Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry bit his lip for a moment, but in the end, he could see no reason not to grant permission for it. Draco would have wanted to come on his birthday anyway, Narcissa was welcome, and Harry was curious what Narcissa's sister and niece would have to say. He scribbled out a reply and sent the eagle-owl home happy.

The second one fluttered forward, and Harry realized in some surprise that it wasn't an owl at all; he'd simply assumed it was because it was dark and he didn't have his glasses. It was a gull, which regarded him with even more haughtiness than an owl as he took the message from its webbed foot. Then it pecked his hand—for no especial reason, Harry thought, or maybe just in case he had food.

The message was sharp and crabbed, as though it had been written by someone not used to holding a quill, and it had no salutation.

We have heard the rumors that you are a vates. We wish to meet you and discuss our future freedom. I speak for the goblin class of Northland: Seadampin, Waterrune, Ternretten, Stonecantor.

Our gulls are by far cleverer than your owls. Speak your answer, and he will know it and bring it back to us.

Helcas Seadampin.

Harry felt his breath tingle in his lungs. He had been awaiting a summons like this, and it seemed it had finally come. He met the gull's eye.

"Tell Helcas Seadampin I will come, though I need more information on where and when," he said.

The gull spread its wings, and then abruptly dissipated into a shower of white sparks. Harry watched them rain down on his bed, burning nothing, since they fluttered out before they touched the blankets, and swallowed. He had not known that the goblins had such formidable magic.

He shook his head slightly, and then turned to regard the third owl. It looked rather anemic, and barely raised its head when he called. Harry had to walk over to it and remove its letter.

Potter:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge spoke of an albatross hanging around one's neck. He was not really a Muggle poet, but a Squib. Did you know that his mother was a witch who never acknowledged her heritage after her wand was broken for casting an Unforgivable when she was eleven? She cast it at a Muggle, and the Muggle died. And then she married a Muggle. What a waste of talent, in both ways.

Harry stared at the parchment. What?

The letter went on.

The sailors hung the albatross around the Ancient Mariner's neck to be a burden, because he'd shot the sacred bird and thus cursed them, and always had to be reminded of his actions. Let me be your albatross, then.

Greetings.

Evan Rosier.

Harry hissed. The name was the name of a Death Eater, who for a very long time he had believed dead, killed in one of the battles of the First War the year he and Connor were born. But he'd seen the man alive in May, the night he killed Rodolphus—

With practiced ease, Harry cut off the thought, and stared hard at the letter. Why would Evan Rosier be writing to him? Why was he rambling on about Squib poets and albatrosses and witches who killed Muggles?

More to the point, he realized abruptly, how did the owl bearing a known Death Eater's letter get past the wards surrounding Lux Aeterna? They should have kept anything a Death Eater had touched out. They'd made Harry's hand tingle for hours afterward just because he'd touched Snape's arm when his guardian originally tried to come through the wards.

It was a mystery, and one that Harry didn't like.

"No response," he told the owl.

The owl gave a feeble hoot and turned to fly away. Then it collapsed to the carpet. Harry knelt beside it and watched one talon flex and then slowly close again.

Dead, he realized. Perhaps the effort of getting through the wards was too much for it.

He backed carefully away from it, not needing the echo of Snape's voice in his head to know that touching the dead bird wasn't a good idea, and hoped the brownies would dispose of it. He would write Snape in the morning, and tell him about Rosier's letter. Snape had been a Death Eater, had known him firsthand. Perhaps he would know what Rosier was on about.

With an effort, Harry turned his thoughts towards the meetings with the goblins and the Tonks instead. He felt a pleasant tingle of excitement.

Finally, I'm going to be doing something.

Chapter Three: Griphook Fishbaggin's Legacy

Harry:

Convince your father to lower the wards.

Harry sighed and shook his head. He had known Snape would act like this, though he had sent the letter anyway, thinking his guardian had the right to be informed of Rosier's ability to get at him. But really, James had examined the dead owl, and though he had gone quite pale, he had assured Harry that Rosier had only used an old piece of Dark magic, both to kill it and to get it through the wards. It was one that inspired the owl with a fervor to complete its delivery at any cost and made it draw on its own life-force in order to do so. So it had managed to break through the wards, but it could not possibly have lived long after that.

James had performed the counter-curse, and now all was well; no other owls charmed with the same spell would be able to get through the wards.

Harry could almost feel the Snape in his head fuming that it wasn't enough. If the wards had one weakness, they could have others. He should be reading the books on wards that Snape had sent. He should be studying ways to outperform any similarly nasty Dark spells the Death Eaters might use on him. He should stop receiving owls altogether. He should leave Lux Aeterna, which was obviously vulnerable to threats, and come live in Hogwarts with Snape, where no Death Eater would be able to enter.

Harry couldn't do the last two, and he would do the first two. He wrote as much in his letter to Snape, which he sent on its way with Hedwig before the sun was fully over the horizon. He stood in the window of his room, watching her fly, and gnawed her lip. Sometimes he thought it was good that he and Connor had moved into separate rooms—he couldn't have handled all the owls as easily if they were still sleeping in the same one—but right now, he would have liked to have his brother beside him, so that he could reach out and simply receive a hug.

Then Harry shook his head and turned for the door out of the room.

It was their birthday, or at least the morning of their birthday. And Harry had big things happening today. The meeting with the Malfoys and the Tonks was this morning, the meeting with the northern goblins this afternoon.

There would be time to worry about hugs later.
“Happy birthday, Harry, Connor!”

Harry blinked intelligently. He hadn't expected their father to have presents ready for them when he went to the dining hall table for breakfast. But he did, two gifts wrapped in red silk patterned with gold sunbursts. Harry thought he recognized more of the same kind of cloth that their Midsummer ships' sails had been made from.

James grinned at him. Harry read the hope in his eyes, and smiled back. He felt a distant pity. James was trying hard, really, to be a good father. He was just poor at it.

Well, giving him extra chances was a small price to pay.

Connor was at the table, grinning at him over a birthday breakfast of sausages and pancakes and Chocolate Frogs. “Dad made me wait until you were up to open my present,” he half-complained at Harry.

Harry gave him a smile, too. In truth, he'd been up for some hours, writing the letter to Snape and reading the books on wards before that arrived, but Connor no longer knew that, as they no longer slept in the same bedroom.

It was odd how unsettled he was by that, really.

I'm just used to sharing a bedroom, Harry dismissed it, and came to sit down in his own spot. He looked out of the corner of his eye, and thought he caught a glimpse of a small, dark cloak as the brownie brought his breakfast. He didn't stare long, though. The research he'd done in the Potter library said that brownies hated to be scrutinized, or even thanked for their services. The bargain Matilda Potter had

made with them was a true bargain, respected on both sides; the family and the brownies owed each other nothing more.

“Well, I’m here now, so you can open it,” he said, with a nod to Connor.

Connor didn’t need further permission, tearing into his gift. He gaped as the red cloth fell away. Harry craned his neck, not quite able to see what it was.

“Wow, Dad,” Connor whispered, as he scooped out the object and held it up for Harry to see. “This is really special.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. It was, indeed. James had got Connor a dueler’s wand—one that was obviously made of holly wood, like his actual wand, and thus modeled after his. A dueler’s wand could be used only in battle or practice for battle, either formal duels or all-out war, and grew acclimated to more and more spells as its wizard cast them. If Connor often used Protego with his dueler’s wand, then the wand would become accustomed to the Shield Charm, and would begin casting it with only half the word out, or even nonverbally, long before Connor would have been able to master such feats of magic with his other wand. It was an honorable weapon and a method of winning, both in one.

“Open your gift, Harry,” Connor urged, snapping out of his reverie.

Harry turned curiously to his gift. He had assumed without thinking about it that James would buy him and Connor the same gifts, or at least similar ones. But he really didn’t need a dueler’s wand, interesting complement though it might make to his own cypress one. He had enough trouble remembering to use his regular wand as it was.

He slid the cloth off, and blinked. He didn’t recognize the object that lay beneath it for a moment, and then it clicked. He held it up and turned it slowly in his hands. It was beautiful, made of copper so old it had acquired a green tinge, and the needle within looked like silver. The N on it was a softly glowing letter that might be made of fairy dust.

"A compass?" he asked.

James did not answer. Harry looked at him, and found his face deadly serious, not the proud but anxious one it had been when he watched Connor hold up the dueler's wand.

"An alliance compass, Harry," he said. "It detects both magical power and the friendship that other people feel towards its bearer. I want you to carry it with you. When you're in danger, it will point towards the nearest person who can help you. Follow the pointer, and it will lead you there by the shortest route possible." He let out a long, shaking breath. "Merlin knows you need it."

Harry swallowed. "This came from the Potter treasures, didn't it?" he asked, turning the compass around in his fingers. He had heard of things like this, but they were always family heirlooms, not the kind of thing that one could buy casually in Diagon Alley.

James nodded. "During the Firestar Wars, a Lord arose. Everyone thought he was a Light Lord at first, but then he turned to Dark magic...or he might even have found a way to combine Light and Dark magic both at once, which no one wants to consider because that's rather frightening." His eyes looked past Harry, and Harry could almost picture his father as a young boy, shivering slightly in awe and wonder as he crouched by a storytelling parent's or grandparent's chair. "Our ancestor Helen Potter made and used this one. Once it led her on a three-day chase across Northumberland, when the Firestar Lord had cloaked the whole region in an anti-Apparition spell, one that also forbade the use of Portkeys. There was no ally nearer than three days of running away. And he was chasing her himself. He badly wanted her dead." James returned to himself, and his smile was both proud and sad. "He'd been her betrothed once, you see, the man she was in love with. No one else knew him the way she did. As long as she was alive, then someone might still be able to figure out one of his hidden weaknesses."

Harry made a mental note to look again at the history books Hermione had brought him. This sounded more fascinating than he had thought they would prove.

And James wasn't really a poor father, just an inexperienced one.

He closed his hand carefully around the alliance compass. "I'll carry it at all times, Father. I promise."

James met his eyes keenly, then smiled and nodded. "Good, Harry." He glanced at Connor. "Remus said that he'd be waiting for you outside, if you want to duel with him there. I see that you're mostly finished with breakfast, anyway."

"Yes!" Connor slipped out of his chair. "I'll go and see him." He grabbed Harry in an abrupt hug around the waist, startling him considerably. "You better carry the compass with you all the time," he whispered in his ear. "You're in danger."

Harry blinked and patted his twin's back. Connor had known that before, of course, but it was gratifying to see him realize it. "Thanks, Connor."

His brother slipped out of the room, and James took a deep breath. "Eat your breakfast first, Harry," he said, before Harry could open his mouth.

Harry nodded and dug into his food, watching his father carefully. James obviously wanted to say—something.

"I blocked the spell that Rosier used to send the owl through the wards," said James, his face long. "That doesn't mean that he won't try again. I read his letter, and couldn't make heads or tails of it. He was always one of the cleverest of the Death Eaters, and I'm not sure what he intends."

He looked Harry directly in the eye. "That letter brought home to me how much you could die at any time. You're not safe, Harry, not here at Lux Aeterna and not anywhere else."

Harry nodded. "I already accept that."

"But things can be done to keep you safe," James said. Harry slowed down on forking sausages into his mouth—lately he'd been incredibly

hungry—and watched his father warily. He sounded almost manic about this, almost Snape-like. “Thus the alliance compass. Thus the wards. I want you to promise me that you won’t go outside the wards, Harry.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He’d told his father about Narcissa Malfoy’s formal visit this morning, and it was beyond bad manners not to meet with her if she couldn’t come inside Lux Aeterna’s wards; it could endanger his standing among any other pureblood wizards she’d managed to tempt into considering his offers. And the northern goblins had flatly refused to meet him anywhere near Lux Aeterna. The closest they would come was the shore where Harry, Connor, and James had gone for the Midsummer ritual. “I have to.”

“No, you don’t,” said James. “Tell them that you’ll talk to anyone who comes inside the wards, but not otherwise.”

“Not everyone can,” Harry pointed out, clinging to his patience as he felt it slip. He had to do this, didn’t his father see that? Not in the sense of duty or obligation, at least not with the vates work, but with the sense of a moral principle. It pricked him every time he thought about anything else for long. So long as his primary goal was training Connor and helping him heal, Harry could think about something else, but Connor had duels with Remus now, and had reversed even their usual listening positions since his talk with Hermione, insisting on hearing Harry’s side of the fight with Voldemort in the Shrieking Shack. So Harry thought about being a vates and a not-Lord instead. “And I still have to talk to them. It’s an insult not to talk to them.”

“They can get over it,” James insisted.

“Not an insult in the sense of politeness,” said Harry. “An insult to their free will, or an insult to their honor. I don’t want to insult anybody, Dad. We have to have all the wizards I can swing on our side to win this war. And the goblins...they’ve been bound, I know they have, and I want to listen to what they have to tell me.”

James closed his eyes. “I knew Lily trained you to be a soldier,” he said. “I didn’t know she trained you to be a politician, too.”

Harry rose cleanly above the pain that was still there at the sound of his mother's name. She was nothing to him any more. "Whatever was needed," he said. "Politics is part of winning this war. I've known that since I was five and started learning the histories of the pureblood families and their dances. I've got to court them, Dad. You know that."

James sighed. "Compromise, then. I'll come with you to any meetings outside the wards."

Harry winced. "That'll work for my meeting with Mrs. Malfoy, but not for the goblins. They specifically said I wasn't to bring anyone else."

"Why did you agree to meet with them, then?"

"Because I have to," said Harry. "It's a great honor that they would trust me enough to meet with me at all, after the way wizards have bound them."

James tensed, and sat in silent stillness for a long while. Then he nodded. "Fine. But you'll take a Portkey to the goblin meeting with you."

"Fair enough." Harry had been planning to ask for one anyway. In emergencies before, he'd been able to Apparate, but it wasn't a pleasant experience, or one he looked forward to repeating.

"Let's go meet with the Malfoys, then," James said, rising to his feet. Then he gave a faint smile and sat down again. "When you finish your breakfast, of course."

Harry began hastily swallowing his pancakes.

Harry watched as four shapes came into being at the Apparition point, and felt Lux Aeterna's wards react at once, even though they were outside of them, reaching out to assess the Dark magic that came with the new arrivals. Harry felt their hiss and crackle, and suspected they were spitting at Narcissa Malfoy. It was just as well they'd chosen to meet out here, he thought, on this clean, wide sweep of lawn next to a flowing river the color of malachite, and not try the house's patience.

Narcissa released Draco, who looked slightly queasy from Side-Along Apparition, but hurried up to Harry and hugged him nonetheless. "Happy birthday, Harry!" he crowed.

Harry smiled and hugged him back, relieved that there was no sign of an ostentatious package. "What did you get me, Draco?" he teased, stepping back and making a show of looking around. He felt James shift at his side, uneasily, but ignored him. The alliance compass was safely tucked into his robe pocket, after all, and his father must know there was no way that Draco's gift would compete with it.

Draco grinned at him and bounced back to his mother. Narcissa released a Disillusionment Charm on something floating beside her, and a broom came into view. Draco seized it and tugged it triumphantly back towards Harry.

"Oh, no," Harry said.

"Oh, yes," said Draco maniacally. "It's the new Firebolt. Happy birthday, Harry." He looked quite content.

Harry reluctantly looked the broom over. He had to admit it was magnificent; the soft hum of magic around it had already told him that. But he felt rather embarrassed. It was a very expensive present. Draco didn't have to get him this. Harry did love flying, but it wasn't as though he were mad for Quidditch in the same way Connor was.

Draco had apparently anticipated the entire silent conversation Harry was having with himself. "I wanted to get it for you," he said. "It's yours. And it's charmed so that you're the only one who can ride it."

"Draco!" Harry said, startled out of his reverie. "That's not a good idea! What if we're in danger and someone else has to ride it, or it has to bear a wounded person?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Think about something other than the war for ten seconds, Harry," he said crossly, and folded his arms. Harry considered and discarded the idea of telling him he looked like Hermione when he did that. "I bought this for you to have fun, and to

have something of your very own to keep. The charms don't fade or wear off, either," he added, dashing Harry's next hope.

It's a nice broom, said Regulus's voice abruptly in the back of his head. Take it, for Merlin's sake.

I thought you were elsewhere, Harry retorted, and reached out reluctantly to take the broom. The moment he touched it, the broom gave a little sound remarkably like a purr, and settled into his grasp. "Thank you, Draco," he said aloud. "I'm sorry if I sounded ungracious. I was just...startled."

Did you think I would miss a meeting with my cousins? Regulus hummed to him. And it's a very nice broom. They didn't make them like that in my day. Ride it, for Merlin's sake.

Harry studied Draco's beaming face, and sighed. I plan to. I just—I just didn't... He shook his head, unable to express why this made him so uncomfortable.

"Harry."

Harry was grateful to turn and meet Narcissa's eyes, inclining his head. At the moment, the prospect of getting his father and Narcissa to be calm around each other was better than the thought of dealing with the emotions that Draco's gift roused in him. "Mrs. Malfoy," he said aloud. "May I present my father, James Potter?"

"We have been formally introduced, once before, long ago," said Narcissa as she came nearer. She held out one elegant white hand. Her face was the epitome of a pureblooded witch, bland and calm. "I am not sure if your father remembers."

"I remember," said James. Harry swung his head to look at his father, startled. He'd never heard his voice sound like that before: tight, restrained, as if he were in the middle of a dance himself. He grasped Narcissa's hand. "You wore a lovely gown."

Narcissa's faint smile flickered around the corner of her mouth. "A Light wizard to the bone," she murmured. "Absolute truth. I suppose

you would keep your mouth shut on my kindness, or lack thereof, that night?"

James raised his brows, but said nothing.

Narcissa stepped away with a faint bow of her head, and turned to Harry. "Harry, may I present my sister, Andromeda Black Tonks, and her daughter, Nymphadora Tonks, who has just completed her training in the Auror program?"

Harry turned to face the two witches who had waited at the Apparition point, his senses on edge now. Was the Ministry going to learn secrets about him from Nymphadora? Was the Order of the Phoenix?

His first sight of Nymphadora rather reassured him, though. She wore the robes, black edged with silver, that a pureblood witch would for a formal meeting, but her hair was purple, also edged with silver, and dazzlingly bright. She came eagerly forward to meet him, and tripped on the hem of her robes. She helped herself back up again, her smile not even faltering, and shook his hand.

"Call me Tonks, Harry," she said. "Everyone does. I hate Nymphadora. I can't imagine why some people chose it," she added, with a glare over her shoulder at her mother, who was approaching much more slowly.

Harry found himself grinning. Well, if she can be informal, so can I. "Let me guess," he said. "Metamorphmagus? Unless you're into Muggle dyes."

"Right the first time!" Tonks said cheerfully, and grew her nose longer in demonstration, for a moment making her face look alarmingly like Snape's. "I've been wanting to meet you for months. You realize you're the cause of the first non-bitchy letter that my mother's exchanged with her sister in ten years?"

"Now, Nymphadora," said Andromeda, who had halted at her left shoulder, entirely properly. "That word is inappropriate. We are sometimes cool and restrained with each other, but we are never...what you said." She nodded calmly to Harry. She was dark-

haired and dark-eyed. Harry would have thought that she looked remarkably like her elder sister Bellatrix Lestrange, but not having a light of crazed madness shining in her eyes did wonders in diminishing the resemblance. "Congratulations, Mr. Potter. I have heard what you did for...certain elements who might otherwise not have found the fire."

Harry blinked. She was referring to Sirius's funeral. For some reason, he hadn't thought Narcissa would tell her sister about that. "Mrs. Tonks," he said, and held out the hand that Tonks wasn't holding. "A pleasure to meet you."

"Indeed," Andromeda murmured, ignoring his hand. "I am obviously not adverse to Muggleborns, since I married one, and I do not use much Dark magic. But, of late, my unease with Dumbledore has been growing. I am glad that you may represent a third side to this war, one that I can comfortably join, without worrying that I am gaining a Lord who will turn on me later." Her eyes were wide and cool and utterly direct. "My sister said that about you, and I do trust her on that score."

Harry smiled again. Andromeda was as cutting as Narcissa in her own way, but she didn't go for the subtle dances, and sometimes that was refreshing, like the slap of the breeze across his face. "I hope to represent one," he answered. "Until recently, the Boy-Who-Lived was synonymous with Dumbledore, but my brother's learning better."

"I was not thinking of the Boy-Who-Lived, but of you," said Andromeda, stressing the last word more than Harry thought was strictly necessary. "You are the one who impressed my sister and her son."

Harry sent a sideways glance at Narcissa and Draco. They were both keeping out of this formal introduction, as was proper, but Narcissa had a faint smile on her lips. Draco just looked challenging, as if he wanted Harry to remember the conversation back in June when Draco had first told him he would have to be a leader.

"That's true, at least," he said. "But I certainly don't intend to fight against my brother."

"No one said anything about that, either," said Andromeda. "Connor Potter is of no matter to me until and unless he does something more momentous than defeating the Dark Lord as a baby."

Draco opened his mouth, and Harry just knew he was about to say something unfortunate, such as the truth about the prophecy. He hastily intervened. "Mrs. Tonks, Tonks, this is my father, James Potter."

"We have met before," said Andromeda, with a glance that said she didn't relish the reminder, but she held out her hand. James kissed it with absolute precision.

Tonks didn't repeat the gesture. Her eyes were wide with wonder. "The James Potter?" she blurted. "The James Potter who brought in the Lestranges? The James Potter who once shielded fourteen Muggle families from the Black Plague spell in one night? You're him?" She looked all but ready to burst into song. "Somehow I never made the connection! It's a pleasure to meet you, sir!" She stuck out a hand in what was obviously meant to inspire a shake and not a kiss to her knuckles. "I've just finished my Auror training, and you're one of my heroes."

James looked horribly uncomfortable as he grasped her hand. Harry thought it was probably the reminder about the Lestranges. "Thank you," he said. "Sirius used to talk about you. He regretted that he didn't get to see you more often."

Tonks smiled at him. "He was the only one who didn't call me Nymphadora when I was a kid," she said. "Even in letters. Yeah, I liked him. I'm so sorry he's gone."

James blinked. "I should be the one saying that to you, Miss Tonks."

Tonks shook her head. "I liked him, but I didn't really know him," she said. "He was your best friend. I'm sorry you lost him."

James had to look away from her. Harry blinked. Tonks was doing better than he could have in a similar situation, even though she'd

referenced Sirius. He hoped that was a good indication of things to come.

Then he looked at Narcissa, whose face was aloof, and Andromeda, who simply looked blank, and sighed. It wasn't going to be easy.

But he didn't intend to give up either his blood father or his best friend and his relatives, and the sooner that both sides understood that, the better.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked back at Andromeda, glad of the question. Hopefully, whatever she asked of him would distract attention from the confrontation that felt as if it were going to happen, what with having both Malfoys and Potters in the same place.

"Can you show me your magic?" Andromeda asked. "Lower all your shields and show me the full strength? I have heard that your displays in the past were rather impressive, but I have not felt them myself."

Harry read the hidden message in her voice. She wanted to trust him, but she had no particular reason to do so, not until she saw some actual evidence of power from him. Narcissa had been the one who had observed or told her everything so far, and she wanted some granite proof.

Harry nodded, then closed his eyes and lowered his shields.

He felt his magic swell around him and then flood out, singing, across Lux Aeterna's lawn. It was under much better control than when he'd released it at the Quidditch game back in November, or from the Owlery at the vernal equinox. He could command it to rise up around him and hover, not overwhelming anyone, but not letting anyone who watched doubt its depth, either.

He opened his eyes. He saw the world through a shimmering haze of golden-white light, which didn't surprise him, as he was feeling calm

at the moment. He was surprised by the expressions on the faces around him.

Draco grinned smugly. Come to that, Narcissa wasn't far from a smug grin herself. James had a combination of a proud and worried look on his face, tilting towards the worried.

Tonks held out a hand, as though she could feel the solid force of the magic in the air itself, and grinned at Harry. "Wicked," she said.

Andromeda slowly closed her eyes. Harry had no idea what she was thinking as she stood there, apparently soaking in the magic.

Then she opened her eyes and whispered, "It will serve. It will more than serve. If you can avoid becoming a Lord, you will be greater than any wizard this world has seen for more than thirty generations."

Harry blinked, wondering why she'd picked the number thirty generations, and then reminded himself that his magic had been out of bounds a bit too long. Tonks and Draco were both beginning to get dreamy expressions on their faces. He had enough of a problem with his magic sometimes flooding out of the boundaries of his own mind and changing people when he didn't know about it. What it could do when completely free resembled one of the better healing potions.

He gently caged his power again, and met Andromeda's eyes. "I'm interested in defeating Voldemort, in freeing the magical creatures, and in helping those who will agree to settle problems," he said. "Not in—well, in becoming a Lord, or doing what Dumbledore has done."

"The power is always a temptation," Andromeda whispered. She sounded like a worshipper in a church. "To turn to compulsion. That is what felled so many of the Lords in the past, Lords who could have been great."

"I hope to avoid that trap," said Harry. "I want to be a vates, if you're familiar with the word. I'm doing what I can to control my magic and my unconscious compulsive abilities both. I don't know if I'll succeed, but I want to."

Andromeda smiled. "Yes," she said. "I believe you will. And I believe that I am willing to become your formal ally." She added, without even looking away from Harry, "Stop grinning, Narcissa."

Harry grinned slightly, himself, and turned to glance at his father. James was giving him an unfathomable stare.

Hopefully, he'll think I'm safe when I go off to meet the goblins this afternoon, Harry thought. And he'll get along with the Malfoys and the Tonks after all. This is going rather well.

It is, Regulus agreed happily from the back of his head. Whoever thought my cousins could be sterling examples of good sense when they wanted to be? In both choice of allies and choice of brooms?

Harry felt the difference the moment the whirl of the Portkey let him go and he found himself facing that same beach from which they'd launched their tiny ships. The same beach, yes, but this was later in the summer, without the gentle magic of the solstice to cushion the place. This time, it felt utterly wild, and Harry could hear the magic panting in each roar of the ocean up its beach.

More to the point, there was sharp power in the air, not really wizarding. Harry sniffed once or twice, and glanced straight ahead of him.

White fire, the same color as the sparks that had fallen from the messenger gulls' feathers each time they had come to him, burned ahead of him. Harry took a deep breath and started walking. He had been able to find only contradictory information in A Practical History of Goblins in the North about what one should wear when meeting with the northern clans, and he suspected none of it would be appropriate for a vates wizard meeting with goblins anyway, so he'd chosen to wear simple shirt and trousers and let it go at that.

As he came nearer, the white fire divided into four, the spikes leaping out from a central point to start the fires burning in the midst of rocky nests. Harry still didn't know what caused or fed the fire. Of course, house elves had unique magic, too, and centaurs.

From between the fires, or behind them, or somewhere around them, came the goblins. Each fire had four goblins at it. Four each for the clans of Seadampin, Waterrune, Ternretten and Stonecantor, Harry thought. He didn't know how to tell one clan from the others, so he simply halted at an equal distance between the fires and waited.

One goblin stepped forward from the nearest set of flames. "Harry James Potter?" His voice was a croaking, grating slide, uglier and harsher than the voices of goblins Harry had heard in Diagon Alley when he went to buy school supplies.

Harry inclined his head.

"I am Helcas Seadampin."

Harry nodded, having expected this. The other goblins were hanging back, and one thing that *A Practical History of Goblins in the North* had indeed been good for was detailing what happened when multiple allied clans met with a representative of some outside interest. They inevitably deferred to the most powerful goblin present to speak for them. Griphook Fishbaggin, who had written the book, speculated that their deference to him was rather like the deference of wizards to a Lord.

If what Harry suspected was true, that was exactly backwards, but he would probably learn the truth in a few minutes.

"You are rather silent, for a wizard and a vates," said Helcas, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"I did not wish to give offense," said Harry. "I couldn't find much about your people in any book, and I don't know much of the etiquette."

Helcas had a wild laugh, he thought. From the sea, a gull screamed in response. "We have made sure that wizards cannot understand us from books," he said. "It forces them to come deal with us. We only trusted one wizard to write down the truth, and he got many things wrong."

"Griphook Fishbaggin," Harry whispered.

“Yes.” Helcas cocked his head. “We adopted him, and he was a coward and a traitor in the end. Why were you willing to meet with us?”

Helcas had stepped away from the fire now, and Harry could see him without his eyes dazzling him with purple afterimages. Helcas was taller than the southern goblins he had met before, with skin as gray as the water. His hands bore twisted dark claws, and though Harry glimpsed them clearly only once, he thought Helcas had six fingers on either. Helcas’s face was dominated by his mouth, rich with teeth. Harry was surprised that he could speak English as well as he could, with all those fangs pressing on his tongue.

Be careful, Regulus whispered abruptly in his head.

Harry had had much practice in the last few days concealing his jolt whenever that voice suddenly spoke, as well as his instinctive urge to respond with a nod or a shake of his head. I will be, he whispered back, and focused on the goblin. “Because I became aware of the webs on all magical creatures recently,” he answered. “I think that everyone else should be as free as possible.”

Helcas laughed softly. “Wizards have said things like that to us before.”

Harry suppressed a shrug. “I’m not those wizards,” he said.

Helcas eyed him in silence for a long moment. Then he said, “Griphook Fishbaggin was a coward and a traitor. We took him in, and showed him the truth, and he ran away from it. He said that we must be mistaken, and he wrote his book to show us as poor slaves looking for a leader for our rebellion. Do you know why that is wrong?”

Harry nodded. He’d had the idea after reading over A Practical History of Goblins in the North again. It was the book that Connor had originally got the idea that compulsion was good from, after reading that the goblins apparently wanted a wizard leader who could compel them. “Someone who opens doors is not the same as a ruler,” he

said. "And because a wizard is uncomfortable with what you show him doesn't mean you're lying."

"I like you better than him already," said Helcas. Abruptly, he took a few steps forward and closed one clawed hand on Harry's left wrist, squeezing.

Harry began to breathe as his mother had taught him, retreating before the pain, rolling under it when he couldn't retreat, letting it find but not conquer him. It grew in intensity until he thought his bones might grind into mush, but if they did, then, well, he had the resources to heal himself, either here or at Lux Aeterna. He was certainly not about to strike at the goblins.

"Why aren't you defending yourself?" Helcas whispered. "Can we ask someone for help who won't defend himself?"

"When I think you're going to kill me," Harry whispered back, fighting not to sag to his knees, "then I'll strike."

Helcas laughed like a gull again, wild and near and overwhelmingly loud, and released his wrist. Harry massaged it as the blood rushed back into his hand. He saw no need to pretend that it hadn't hurt. It had, and just like screaming under torture, the acknowledgment could make him hurt less. His pride mattered infinitely less than his life did.

"Patience," said Helcas. "Honesty. Those are good qualities. But they are not the only ones a vates must have." He turned and snapped his claws together in a complicated pattern, too quick for Harry's eyes to follow. One of the other goblins hastened forward, holding an earthenware bottle in his hands.

Helcas picked up the bottle and turned to meet Harry's eyes. "The others follow me because I know what must be done," he said. "We might ask you to look, but no human can see with goblin eyes, unless they are granted to him." He held out the bottle. Harry heard it slosh, and knew it was full of some liquid.

Harry raised his brows. If the other tests had been of patience and honesty, this one was a test of courage.

And stupidity, Regulus snarled. I don't like this. I don't trust goblins, and I don't trust this beach. Something is strange about it.

Of course there is, Harry thought back, even as he accepted the bottle. There is goblin magic in the air.

More than that.

But Regulus didn't say anything else, certainly not to tell him what was strange, so Harry sniffed at the potion. He recognized the scent of seaweed, and nothing else. The potion was thick, green, the color of the river that ran near Lux Aeterna, but it shifted and became gray and brown as he watched.

The colors of Northumberland, Harry thought, as he tipped the bottle off. The colors of the county my father was born in. They won't hurt me.

It was like drinking thick, sandy water. It spilled down his throat and nearly choked him. Harry grimaced and kept swallowing, not allowing any of the vestiges of the liquid to roll out of the corners of his mouth, even though it was tempting. He had to get it all down.

The liquid brewed and churned in his stomach, and then Harry coughed in surprise. The potion itself had been cold, but a burning line seemed to be rising up his throat.

He raised his eyes, and saw the same burning engulf the air in front of him. Dancing white fires were everywhere he looked, not only in the nests of rocks that the goblin clans had made. In fact, those flames became the dimmest as the whole world burned. Harry could see white fire consuming the air, and revealing another world behind the surface one, rather like the one he had traveled with Fawkes.

This one glittered as a vast, empty waste of air above, and, beneath Harry's feet, endless reaches of stone and soil and metal. Harry blinked. He turned his head to the sea, and realized he was seeing the currents that pulsed within it, the veins of salt and warm and cold that made it so different from the land.

“Now,” whispered Helcas, taking his shoulder, “turn and look behind you.”

Harry did, and recoiled. He could clearly see the goblins’ net now, a vast and dirty thing, the web of an old and savage spider, spreading out to the south. As he watched, it reared into one sharply defined peak of foulness very close at hand, and then went on running, linking to other places, lone mountains of filth in the midst of cleanliness. Harry shivered in revulsion.

“What are they?” he whispered.

“The stakes of our net,” Helcas whispered back, his mouth very close to Harry’s ear. “The pins that hold us down, running into the sweet earth itself, making us unable to simply free ourselves. The linchpins.”

Harry understood, then. The nearest mountain of foulness was Lux Aeterna.

“Why did they bind you?” he breathed.

“Why do wizards bind any magical creature?” Helcas sounded old and cross and tired. “Because they wanted things from us. Because they were afraid we might hurt them. Because they didn’t want to hear the truth. In our case, they wanted us to mine.

“But that wasn’t all of it. We told them, when they first tried to establish their linchpins, what it would do to the land they established them in. They sink so deep that they pierce the soil. The earth can’t move and shift around them the way it would naturally.” Helcas motioned with his head in the direction of the beach, though Harry saw that only from the corner of his eye. The black, smoking volcano of Lux Aeterna in this realm of sight still occupied most of his attention. “If all was as it should be, the sea would have eaten this beach long ago, and the land where Lux Aeterna stands would have sunk, and hills would have arisen in other places.”

Harry wanted to close his eyes, hide his face, turn away. He did not. “And the only way to free you is to destroy the linchpins?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Helcas. “All of them. If even one is left, then it will enslave us, and prevent the net from being pulled up.”

“You do realize,” said Harry, startled to hear his own voice so dry, “that it’s less than ideal to ask a Potter, one of the heirs of the nearest linchpin, to destroy his own home?”

“Less than ideal,” said Helcas. “Immediately? Impossible. But you are the vates. We have hope now, where we had none before. You can take your time, vates. But eventually, we expect that you will destroy the linchpins, yes. Your own ideals are stronger than the wizarding world’s.”

Harry tried to think of how many grand old homes he would be destroying, how many pureblood families he would anger, and shook his head. It was too much to contemplate for right now.

But he was not running. He was not turning away.

“I understand,” he said, and then blinked. White flames were crawling back over the world, dimming his sight of the earth and the sea and the slag mountains. He waited until his eyes were normal again, then stepped away from Helcas and turned to look at him.

Helcas studied him intently. His eyes were a thick yellow-green, Harry saw, the color of dead seaweed. “Patience, honesty, courage,” he said. “One more remains.”

He turned and gestured at one of the fires arrayed behind him and off to the left. Harry didn’t know which clan it was, but one of the members stepped forward and tossed Helcas a small object. Helcas felt at it for a moment, then turned and handed it to Harry.

Harry found a small, spiky stone, star-shaped, with one spike on either side and one on top and bottom. He looked at Helcas. “Well?”

“Tell us all the things that you could do with this,” Helcas said.

Harry frowned and looked at the stone. "I could toss it behind me if someone was chasing me and try to stab them in the foot, I suppose," he said. "It'd be good for horses' hooves—well, not good, but it would slow them down. I could throw it at someone else's head and distract them that way, if not actually hit them. I could hold it in my hand and stab it into an enemy's eye."

He tossed the stone, and watched as it sparkled when it soared. Faint veins of silver were probably the cause, he saw, when the stone landed in his palm again. "I could use it as a signal, throwing back the sun, if a friend were close enough. I could use it in a game; it's weighted enough to make a good playing piece. I could use it as the base of several potions, but I'd have to know if the black stone was basalt or onyx or something else first." He grimaced. His studies in stones weren't going as well as he wanted them to, but then, it was hard splitting his attention between all the subjects he wanted to study. He didn't have Hermione's ability to do so effectively.

"And I could use it as a token of friendship—"

He started as Helcas grabbed the stone back out of his hand. Harry looked at him curiously. "What's the matter?"

"You named eight uses," said Helcas, folding the stone back into his palm. Harry winced, but either the goblin didn't feel the spikes cutting into his hand the way Harry would have, or he was unwilling to show pain. "Two for each clan. The final test was one of intelligence."

He stared hard at Harry. "We shall be here, vates, when you feel the need to set us upon the path of freedom at last. We shall send you messages through any storm of danger. We shall tell you the truth, always. And we shall come up with clever plans where others could not."

One correspondence to each virtue they'd tested him on, Harry guessed. He nodded. "Then I suppose our meeting is over?"

"As soon as you tell us why you have brought other wizards along," Helcas said.

"I didn't." Harry immediately thought of Connor's Invisibility Cloak, though, and felt a welling of unease. Did someone follow me out of sight?

"Then explain that," said Helcas, and nodded over his shoulder. Harry turned.

Four black figures were behind him.

Death Eaters! Regulus screamed abruptly in his head. I can feel their connections to Voldemort.

Harry heard wild, immediately recognizable laughter in the same instant, and then the Portkey in his pocket began to burn. He snatched it out and threw it, not letting himself think about it, and watched as it was destroyed, a small sparkle in the air, consuming itself in a burst of fire. Anti-Apparition spells were already up, slamming into place around him and holding him like a fly in amber.

And then the goblins whirled aside, and Bellatrix Lestrange's first hex came at him, and he had no time for anything other than battle.

Chapter Four: Battles In Conversation

Harry felt his shoulder all but crunch on the sand as he avoided Bellatrix's first hex. He felt his heart hammering in his ears, heard his own gasping, and felt an ache travel across his sides that might have been the remnant of the bruises he'd earned from Voldemort's justice ritual, were those not healed long since.

He felt all that, but his attention was on the mental world, interpreting the Death Eaters' movements and the repertoire of spells they were likely to use in this situation and the urgent murmurs that Regulus was handing him.

Rabastan—that must be Rabastan with her, from the way he moves—has a weak left side. Strike him there. The one on the very end is Mulciber. Watch out for his Imperius.

That I knew, said Harry, and heard Bellatrix cry out, predictably, "Crucio!"

Of course she would do that, Harry thought, as he raised his Shield Charm around himself without pausing to breathe out the incantation. She liked to hurt people, and he had killed both her husband and her Lord. He wasn't surprised that she had sought him out for vengeance.

Mind, he would have liked to know how she'd found him.

But when he thought about that, as the Unforgivable bounced from his shield and a hex from Mulciber followed it, he knew. There was only one possible candidate for a guidepost. He'd released his magic, at Andromeda's asking, and it would have lit up the sky like a second sun to anyone looking for it.

Merlin take it, he thought in resignation. That was dangerous. Although how I could have refused when she'd asked me to do so, without insulting her...

His Shield Charm cracked apart under a persistent hex from the Death Eater on the far right, and Harry jerked his mind back to the

battle. He had every chance of surviving this, but not if he nattered on to himself.

Who's that? he asked Regulus as he cast a full body-bind at the one whom Regulus had identified as Rabastan. The man stiffened and toppled over, but Mulciber was already turning to revive him.

Rosier, said Regulus flatly.

Rosier cast back his hood in the next moment, and confirmed Regulus's statement. He was the same dark-eyed, handsome, smiling man Harry had glimpsed on the night he slew Rodolphus. His gaze was fixed on Harry now, and he spoke a few words, his voice unexpectedly loud in that little pause between the firing of spells. Harry could even hear him over the pounding of his heart.

"How dull it is to pause, to make an end," he said, "to rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use! As tho' to breathe were life." He raised his wand and sent a blue hex at Harry that he didn't recognize. He summoned his own magic, figuring there wasn't much use hiding it now, and grabbed the hex in midair, flinging it back at Rosier. The Death Eater dodged it easily, and his voice only grew more assured. "Life piled on life were all too little, and of one to me little remains."

"Shut up, Evan," Bellatrix Lestrangle snapped at him, and then turned and snarled at Harry, her long black hair flying free around her face. "You're going to die, baby," she said, her voice unexpectedly conversational. "I hope that you like potatoes. Before you die, I'll make you peel them, and then cut off your fingers, and serve to you a stew full of potatoes and fingers stripped to the bone."

Harry shuddered in spite of himself, but decided that he might as well do something with all this time his enemies were giving him as they chattered. He gestured with his hand at Rabastan's right side and murmured, loud enough to be heard, "Incendio."

A fire started in the grass at Rabastan's feet, making him lunge to the left. Harry aimed at his ribs.

There's a good spot, said Regulus helpfully.

“Reducto!” Harry snapped, and Rabastan went spinning and slumping, gasping and wheezing aloud. Harry heard several ribs snap clear across the grass.

“Oh, you’ll pay for that, baby,” Bellatrix whispered, and there was no warning of a word this time as she sent the Cruciatus at him again. Harry dropped flat. He didn’t dare let the curse catch him.

“You have no sense of adventure, Bellatrix,” said Rosier, as if continuing a conversation they hadn’t finished, and pointed his wand slightly to the side of Harry. “But every hour is saved from that eternal silence, something more, a bringer of new things.” He fired a hex.

Harry couldn’t understand why it was going to travel past him, at first. Then he remembered the goblins, who had remained still and silent behind him, but apparently not fled.

He jumped into its path, spitting, “Haurio!” The jade-green shield formed in his palm and drank the magic. Harry was reminded that he could, himself, drink magic if he wished, and add some of Rosier’s power to his own. He shook off the temptation. He would either be trying to swallow and incorporate it fully into his own magic in the middle of battle, or he would be slinging around raw and uncoordinated power, and that had not worked well in the past.

He felt a stirring at his back. He kept his eyes forward, though he wove another Shield Charm just above his skin. If Helcas was on the Death Eaters’ side, there was nothing Harry could do about that.

Instead, Helcas said, “He stood to defend us. Gralashigan!”

A storm of white, glinting shapes flew past Harry, and Mulciber gave a shriek. Harry spun to face him, and saw him tugging at two bone-white arrows, one of them embedded in his shoulder and another in his arm. Rosier and Bellatrix had been quick enough to raise shields against them, and Rabastan still lay motionless on the ground.

Harry smiled slightly. It appeared that the goblins were on no side in a wizarding war, unless those wizards actually fought for them.

Rosier threw back his head and laughed. He looked more mad than Harry had thought he was, this close, with his eyes glinting and his voice whispering out the words of a poem that Harry still did not recognize.

“Death closes all: but something ere the end,” he said, bowing to Harry and flourishing his wand, “some work of noble note, may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.” His voice dipped into a more normal register. “I think that we are very close to striving with a god now. *Accendo intra cruore!*”

Harry felt the spell begin within his shields, something that was supposed to be impossible. A moment later, he cried out as his blood began to boil in his veins. He could actually hear his flesh cooking as it flashed and burned, or at least he thought he could.

Hold steady, Harry! Regulus was shouting at him. Unleash that magic-feeding ability you have and turn it on yourself! You can do this. Eat up his spell! Consume into you and make it harmless!

Harry forced himself to listen. What Regulus said made good sense. He would listen. He had to listen. He forced his breathing flat and rolled around the pain, never mind that it was more intense than anything he had ever felt, never mind that he could imagine the fire broiling his liver and his heart. He had to do this, and it was to be done, and he was doing it—

And it was done. Harry felt the fire retreat as his ability hungrily swallowed the curse making its way through his body. It left pain vibrating in him, still, and he wanted nothing so much as he wanted to collapse to the ground and cry, but he could think and feel and function again.

And given the ability that was flooding around him, and the fact that he could have nearly died and so cost Connor and the goblins and Draco and Snape and many other people someone who might matter to them, Harry let go of the hold on his temper.

He fixed his eyes on Rosier, who was cocking his head, not looking really surprised that Harry had survived.

“Tennyson,” he explained, when he saw Harry staring at him. “His father was a wizard. Real father, that is. His mother never told anyone about a certain visitor to her bed one night, but I found the letter she wrote, begging her ‘demon lover’ to come back. I would never quote the words of a simple Muggle, of course.”

Harry didn’t bother replying, but simply gestured. Around him, the snake of his ability opened its jaws wide.

Mulciber shrieked like a girl, probably because Harry would have swallowed the healing spells he was working on the arrows first. And then Harry felt his magic tearing hungrily at the actual magic of the Death Eaters, eating it and chewing on it, and feeding it to Harry as if down a siphon.

This time, Harry was better braced for the rush of insane strength that came to him, and he knew how he wanted to use it. He concentrated, hard, and glittering blue walls sprang into being behind Rosier and Bellatrix. Those would prevent them from moving, by any means, even Portkey or Apparition.

Bellatrix snapped something out of the front of her robe in response, and cast it to the ground in the moment before the blue walls curled around her and completely restricted her movement. Harry saw a familiar black flash.

“Attack,” Bellatrix whispered. “As I am of the Black blood, attack.”

The creature, a centipede with a multilegged and multi-jointed body, scurried forward and through Harry’s blue cage walls as if they weren’t there. Harry focused his ability on it and started to drain it, but his magic rolled off its own with no effect.

They can’t be touched by anyone not of the House of Black, Regulus snarled, in any way. But I can do something about this. How dare she steal our family’s treasures, when she’s not the rightful heir? Open your mouth, Harry.

Harry opened it, trusting him, and spoke in a voice that was not his own. "Back, as I am Black's heir."

The centipede stopped. Harry watched its body sway, blinking now and then as his own body swelled with power. He occupied it in building shields around the goblins, just to make sure that Mulciber and Rabastan, if they recovered, couldn't strike at them.

"No," Bellatrix whispered. "That's impossible. Attack, you cursed creature!"

"I think not," said Regulus's same smooth, self-assured voice, sounding much calmer than it ever was when he shouted in Harry's head. "Toujours pur abstained."

The centipede abruptly self-destructed, rather like Harry's Portkey had, flipping over and ripping itself to shreds. Harry blinked at the gleaming black joints and legs left behind, then lifted his head and met Bellatrix Lestrange's eyes.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Someone who wasn't as dead as you thought, Bellatrix," Regulus said through Harry's mouth. It was rather an odd experience, Harry thought, even as more magic flooded him and he sent more into the shields surrounding the goblins. "And I see now that you've been hiding in one of the family's estates. No wonder the Aurors couldn't find you. I shall make sure to remedy that. I may not have my body back yet, but I have my voice, and my will, and I am the rightful heir of the Black line. From now on, any doors that have opened in our houses because of your bloodline are closed to you, and to those who travel with you."

Bellatrix let out a long, descending scream. Harry caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned swiftly.

Rabastan was writhing slowly. He placed a hand on his left arm, probably above the Dark Mark, and whispered something Harry couldn't make out.

Harry felt the sucking pull of some immense, stirring magic, as perverted as that which Voldemort had unleashed in the Shrieking Shack. He instinctively coiled his ability back about his body, not wanting to swallow any of the foul power now blasting from Rabastan.

In an instant, the anti-Apparition spells the Death Eaters had established were gone, and his shields and cages, without the feeding of new magic to hold them, were melting. Harry fell back a step and prepared for battle.

But Bellatrix obviously knew when she was beaten, and Apparated out. Mulciber and Rabastan followed her a moment later. Rosier lingered, smiling faintly at Harry.

“You’ll want to get to a healer soon,” he said. “My *Accendo intra cruore*—” Harry tensed, but the spell didn’t repeat itself “—can leave a lot of internal damage. Why, I’ve known people who went mad in St. Mungo’s, trying to reverse it.” He tilted his head to the side and clucked his tongue. “Or was that the people who went mad trying to heal from the pain? I can never remember.”

And then he was gone.

Harry sagged to his knees, breathing hard. He felt Regulus retreat into the back of his head, apparently looking at something not visible to Harry, and then murmur, He’s right. And I can feel someone else with a connection to Voldemort coming.

Harry struggled to his feet, then sat down hard on the sand again. His body was reeling from the sudden reversal of magic, and he could feel the first pain coming back again, like the first rise of a long tide at sea. He’d just had his veins cooked from the inside out. He had no idea how much damage had been done, or what had to be done to reverse it, or how much agony he was going to be in in a short while.

A clawed hand caught his elbow. Harry looked up, through eyes already going glassy, and met Helcas’s gaze.

"We are your allies now," said Helcas. "Formally. You defended us. That is not something many wizards, even one who claimed to be vates, would do." His gaze went abruptly over Harry's head. "We will protect you from those who might come to hurt you, even him."

Harry turned his head wearily to look. Yes, the pain was rising, but he had to remain conscious and sane for just a little longer.

He didn't need his usual wits to recognize the figure coming at a dead run across the sands, though. Snape.

Probably Harry's blast of magic had called him, he thought, or perhaps whatever Rabastan had done with the Dark Mark. Harry closed his eyes and sighed. He was glad that Snape was here. He concentrated on remaining conscious, so that he could tell Snape what had happened.

Snape slid to a stop beside him, not even appearing to notice the goblins. Helcas made a motion, but Harry managed to whisper, "He's a friend," and the goblin stopped.

"Harry!"

Harry couldn't even tell which emotion was predominant in that cry, it held so many. He forced his eyes open, and met Snape's gaze calmly.

"Rosier used *Accendo intra cruore* on me," he said, and then the pain grabbed him and dragged him out to sea. Harry felt himself falling through darkness, with sounds that might be the cries of gulls or the laughter of goblins in his ears.

Snape might have glared at the goblins ordinarily. He might have demanded that Harry keep awake and help him with a little more information about what Rosier had done to him, if he could. He might have suffered a surge of rage about what Harry was doing out here alone, with no one to protect him.

He might have done that, if he hadn't heard the name of the spell that Harry had suffered, and seen the telltale black traces already spreading beneath Harry's skin.

Snape grabbed Harry close and shut his eyes. He let his desperation build, his pain, his resolve, and used them to call up a picture of a place he hadn't been in months.

Together, he and Harry Apparated, and he felt the world around him squeeze and tingle unpleasantly the way it always did when he performed Side-Along Apparition. Or Chest-Along Apparition, as it was in this case, Snape thought, as he came out very firmly on the floor of his potions lab at Spinner's End.

He laid Harry down on a stone bench that he usually kept for potions that needed a flat surface, and moved towards the shelves. He had potions here that could fight the Blood-Burning Curse, potions that he didn't have at Hogwarts and doubted they would have at St. Mungo's. He could save Harry's life. He would move fast enough to do so.

He used those thoughts like iron spikes, hammering them into the yammering, yelping, confused mass of his panic, holding it steady. His hands did not shake as he found the proper mixture of potions and poured them into a vial. The mortar and pestle moved in fine, precise strokes as he crushed a small measure of violet petals and likewise emptied them into the mixture of the potions. He did not spin and slosh the brew wildly all over the room; he turned, with no more than a small flourish of his robes, and strode back to Harry.

He pried Harry's jaws apart and emptied the mixture down his throat. He saw the blackness begin to retreat along the path of his veins almost immediately. Harry gave a little shivering sigh and relaxed.

Snape Transfigured a cauldron into a chair and sat down on it, hard, across from Harry.

Then, then, he allowed himself to put his hands over his face, and shake, from affection and pain and fury and the panic of such a near miss. If he had not been there, Harry would have died—perhaps not for days, perhaps in as little as two minutes. The Blood-Burning

Curse did immense damage, contingent on how long it was held and how much the caster wanted to hurt the victim, and Snape had no information on what Rosier's intentions might have been.

Evan Rosier. I wish the Dementors were still at Azkaban, if only so they might contain and cage him.

Snape had thought for the past fourteen years that Rosier was dead, and even though the man had died before he officially abandoned his loyalty to Voldemort, he had been relieved. There was something wild in Rosier, something even more untrustworthy than Bellatrix's unrelenting sadism, something that made him civilized in one moment and then longing for pain and death in the next. He had invented the Blood-Burning Curse, and used it, often so lingeringly that the sufferers had felt their blood slowly boiling away for days. Snape doubted that fourteen years in Azkaban would have improved him.

And Harry had faced him alone—alone. That he had had goblins with him did not matter; goblins would not often fight for wizards. And by the position of the boy's body, he'd been protecting them, not the other way around.

Snape could guess how the Death Eaters had found Harry, too. He himself had felt the beacon rise this morning, the siren song of a magic wild and seductive and alluring, and had identified Lux Aeterna in a few moments. He'd had to control the temptation to Apparate there and snatch Harry away.

Then he'd felt another blast of magic this afternoon, and his Dark Mark had burned the way it did when one of the Death Eaters was using Voldemort's "gift" to befoul all the magic in the area, and he'd Apparated towards both calls without waiting.

And if he had not, Harry would be dead.

Snape slowly dropped his hands from his face and checked on Harry. The boy had uncurled from the tight, almost fetal, position he'd adopted on the way here. The black traces were gone from his hands and his right arm, and had retreated most of the way towards his heart on his left arm. Snape knew the signs. The Curse was

dissipating. The few times he'd used this mixture of potions on other Death Eaters whom Rosier had cursed and the Dark Lord had ordered him to heal, the effect had been the same.

Harry was going to live.

But he so nearly had not.

Snape allowed the rage to wake up in him then. This wasn't the wild emotion he had felt when he thought Harry was still in danger. This was the familiar rage associated with James Potter and Sirius Black, the cold, dark hatred that stalked Snape's veins like a chill version of the *Accendo intra cruore*.

James Potter could not take care of him. He let his son go to meet goblins, alone, after flourishing his magic like a banner outside the wards.

Does he care about Harry at all?

And does he really think that I will let him take Harry back?

He should contact the man fairly soon, Snape considered. Reassure him that Harry was all right, that he hadn't been abducted by Death Eaters. And of course a letter to Draco would not go amiss.

On the other hand, there might be Death Eaters watching Spinner's End, waiting to intercept any owls. Snape really had no way of knowing. He hadn't been here since last summer, and would not have risked coming here now, if not for the potions he'd needed. He should get back behind Hogwarts's wards as soon as possible. The Death Eaters knew his affiliation with the Light, and were hunting him now.

And letters can wait until Harry is safe, he decided, and gathered the sleeping boy up again. This time, he felt almost calm as he Apparated to Hogsmeade. He could actually afford to land outside Hogwarts's anti-Apparition spells, and walk in, without fearing that Harry would die along the way.

He did not feel calm, however, because the rage was waiting under the surface.

I am the only one who can properly protect him. I knew it all along, and still I let him leave. Not this time. Not again.

No matter what anyone says.

Harry woke slowly. He knew that he wasn't at home, as much from the feel of the magic around him as because the sheets didn't fold like his own. He blinked and wiped at his face, and found that he had no glasses. A quick glance located them on the bedside table, and from the thick stone walls around him, he guessed he was at Hogwarts.

His broken memories traced themselves back to darkness, and pain, and Professor Snape crouched over him—

“Feeling better, Harry?”

And here came Professor Snape now, swooping through the door of the room like a huge black version of the gulls on the Northumberland shore. Harry nodded hesitantly at him; he couldn't see his expression that well without his glasses. “Fine, thank you, sir, although I'm still weak,” he said. He hesitated, then added, “You probably saved my life.”

For a moment, Snape stilled, and Harry wondered what emotions the words roused, how close he had come to death. Then Snape said, in an almost neutral voice, “Yes, I did. And now you are in a private room that I have furnished for your convenience, linked to mine with a magical door. The loo is to your right, and there is a small library beyond this door, already stocked with books, that you may peruse when you are feeling better.” Snape came close enough for Harry to make out his expression this time, and added, “I am certain you would go mad if you were left without something to do.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, I would, sir.” He was uneasy. Something was wrong. He had been certain that Snape would come in raging about the carelessness of parents in general and James Potter in particular,

how his father wasn't fit to care for his own sons, how Harry would have been better off with Fenrir Greyback, and how obviously neither Remus Lupin nor his brother could be trusted to have heads on their shoulders, either. Instead, Snape watched him with intent but not agitated eyes, and seemed to be waiting for a first sally from Harry, instead of a response.

Harry finally coughed and said, "Were the goblins fine, sir?"

"They were," said Snape. "None of them were injured that I saw. Granted, my first priority was not injured goblins."

Ah, the first hint of sharpness in his voice. Harry relaxed at hearing it. He would rather deal with an angry, and thus familiar, Snape than the calm stranger who'd come striding into the room. "Then they probably weren't at all," he said. "I did pour some of my magic into shields to defend them." He paused again, and still Snape stood silent. Harry fidgeted with the blankets. Isn't he even going to scold me?

Abruptly, a new thought struck him. Did something horrible happen to someone else, and he doesn't want to tell me?

He stared at Snape, who immediately came over to sit down on a chair beside the bed. "What is it, Harry?"

"What about James and Connor and Remus?" Harry whispered. "Was there a—a disaster at Lux Aeterna? Did the Death Eaters get them?" His mind jumped to people who wouldn't have been in the vicinity of either Rosier or Bellatrix next. "What about Draco? Narcissa? One of the other Slytherins? I—"

Snape caught his wrist and held it, firmly enough that Harry couldn't pick at the blankets any more, or scratch at his scar, as he'd half-raised his hand to do. "No one suffered, Harry," he said. "No one but Death Eaters, who doubtless deserved it, and you. And that is why you are going to be staying with me for the rest of the summer."

Harry let out a relieved breath, and then his mind caught up with his ears.

That's why he's so calm, he realized, as he studied Snape again. He's acting as though this is already settled.

Of course, it wasn't. Harry was damn well going to fight it. What unnerved him wasn't Snape's mask—he would probably have tried to look composed in the face of Voldemort returned—but how genuine it seemed, as though he really thought Harry couldn't make a successful argument.

"I have to let James and my brother know what happened," he said evenly.

"I have already done so," said Snape. "And Draco, and Narcissa. And the Headmaster knows you are here, Harry, and has agreed to let you stay the summer—and stay out of our way. He has learned better."

Harry sighed. "I didn't want to have to say it," he said. "I'll remain with you a few days, enough to make sure all the effects of that curse are gone, and then I'm leaving for Lux Aeterna."

Snape sat back in his chair, releasing his grip on Harry's hand. "Harry," he said, "you seem to be under the impression that if I let you go home, you would do something other than attempt to get yourself killed again."

"That wasn't deliberate," Harry snapped, his temper flaring. He saw Snape wince, and calmed his magic as hard as he could. "I know now that I summoned the Death Eaters by letting my magic flare out of control. That won't happen again. And I won't venture out to meet with the goblins again, either. They can send messages to me through the wards. I really would have tried to save myself, but someone, Bellatrix probably, cast a spell that destroyed my Portkey first thing. And I couldn't have known that Rosier would use that spell. I never heard of it."

"None of that matters," said Snape, immovable as a petrified tree. "Your father was beyond careless in the first place to send you out with nothing more than a Portkey for protection."

“I had an alliance compass, too,” Harry said. “In my robe pocket.”

Snape sneered. “Much good that would do you when you were under immediate attack.”

“The goblins helped—“

“It does not matter.” Snape leaned sharply forward. “You are not returning to Lux Aeterna for the rest of this summer, Harry, and not for Christmas or Easter, either, if I have a say in it. I have been worried about you before. My worry increased when you reported Rosier’s letter to me. This attack...” He shook his head. “My demanding that you remain here is as much for my sake as for your own. Your absence has been destroying my ability to do useful work. That will stop now.”

Harry scowled at him. The thing was, he really couldn’t imagine anyone better-suited to protect him than Snape. Snape was harder to evade or distract than most other people, and now that he’d been frightened for Harry’s life, he would make it even harder. He would make restrictions, and he would enforce them. He had no other children to care for, as James had Connor. He was a powerful wizard, and wouldn’t hesitate to use Dark magic in the cause of Harry’s defense, and he could use potions to heal most injuries Harry received, as he’d already proven.

And that was precisely the reason Harry wanted to go home. The restrictions weren’t what he needed, not if he was going to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish this summer. He wanted to be around Connor to encourage him and set him on his own two feet; Remus could only do so much, and so could James. Harry needed to get more used to defending himself, too, and brewing his own potions, which was what he’d been trying to do when the orange mess exploded in his makeshift potions lab.

Snape would insist on getting in between him and danger. He hadn’t yet come to the realization James had, that Harry was in danger every moment he breathed anyway.

So perhaps I can help him come to it, Harry thought abruptly, and nodded. He knew how stubborn Snape could be, how unwilling to recognize reality when it didn't accord with his preconceptions. Perhaps he needed a blunt, open statement of it to let him face it.

"I could die anyway," he told Snape calmly. "You can't wrap me up in cotton wool, and threats could find their way through Hogwarts's wards if they're determined enough. So you might as well let me go to a place where I can be useful. I understand you care for me, I know that, but sometimes the most caring act a guardian can perform is to step aside and let his charge make his own mistakes."

Snape still looked too calm, though Harry could see his fingers spidering along the edge of the blankets, and knew he was feeling at least some rage. "A mistake is one thing," he said. "And I will indeed be pleased to instruct you in potions and defensive magic, Harry, so that when you face your enemies, you may survive. There is a large difference between that and leaving you to die."

"James didn't leave me to die—" Harry started to argue.

"Regardless, you almost did." Snape's hand came out and closed around Harry's left wrist, in the same place that Helcas had held him, and squeezed with no gentle pressure. Harry winced. Snape stopped squeezing, but didn't let his hand go, instead staring into his eyes with a feral intensity. "And if you are indeed in as much danger as you say, it makes sense that you should be in the place and with the person who gives you the greatest chance of surviving. That person is not James. Or do you disagree with that?" he added, with a little purring tone in his voice that reminded Harry of the way he sounded when he got ready to serve students with detentions.

"No," said Harry. "But you don't understand, sir. I want to be with my brother and my father."

"Why?" Snape asked.

Harry hissed at him.

“I have committed no crime,” said Snape blandly. He still hadn’t let go of Harry’s wrist, and he still hadn’t leaned away from him. “I’ve asked you a question. Answer it.”

Harry ducked his head. He hated this. He couldn’t think of a subject to distract Snape, and even if he could, it wouldn’t do much good, not with Snape trapping him like this and able to detect lies as a Legilimens.

And meanwhile, all that attention was focused. On him.

He didn’t like it. Remnant of his training, result of his love for Connor, the fact that it was Snape—no, not the last, he would have felt this way if anyone had stared at him with such intensity, he felt this way when Draco did it—he didn’t like it. He didn’t like being stared at, and peered at, and remarked about in wondering tones. Rumors were at least better than the stares, because he could pretend that they didn’t exist if he couldn’t hear them. But he couldn’t escape the stares, and he knew that meant the person involved was looking at him, considering him, when all Harry really wanted was to duck into the shadows.

That was another reason he didn’t think he could be a leader, no matter what Draco might say. He did well enough in small formal meetings. How in the world could he stand in front of an army or a gathering of wizards expecting a grand speech and not feel frozen and pierced to the bone by the stares? That was Connor’s scene, or the scene that Connor would be master of once he was trained, not Harry’s.

Someone else can get that attention, he thought, as he hunched his shoulders and ducked his head further and felt, all the while, Snape’s hand on his wrist like a manacle, binding him to reality. I know it happens. I have no problem with it. But not me. Not like this. Stop looking at me.

“Answer it,” Snape breathed, and Harry decided reluctantly that he would have to answer it, as long as it meant that Snape would stop looking at him.

He licked his lips and whispered, "I—I think I should try to create a family with them again. I want to reconcile with James. I want to give him a chance. I want to make sure that Connor has what he needs, and does heal from the wounds that Sirius's death inflicted on him. He does need attention, you know. He needs—"

"We were not talking about your brother," Snape said. "We were talking about you."

Harry discovered he couldn't look up yet, and brought his head back down. He'd counted on mention of Connor to deflect Snape into a tirade about his brother. That evidently wasn't going to work. He felt stripped naked. "I—I don't feel like I have much to do with them, now that I know James does want to reconcile with me and Remus is training Connor," he whispered. "So I'm trying to study. But it's difficult on my own, and I can't get any peace, and I keep thinking of other things I should be doing, and trying to build a family step by step with them instead of letting it grow naturally, because if that happens, it'll all fall apart again."

"So you don't want to stay with them," Snape summed up effortlessly. "Or, at least, that is not your sole ambition. But you feel as if you should want to stay with them."

Harry nodded, his eyes on his hands. He'd come to that realization early last week, when he'd wondered why his head was filling up with restlessness as he thought of his various tasks, instead of the calm, ordered resolve that he usually got when he made a list of things he had to do. He could have done so many of the things he had to do better at Hogwarts or Malfoy Manor. But he was confined in Lux Aeterna, distant from the people who understood him best, with wards inhibiting his freedom of movement, around a brother who seemed to be doing just fine without him and a father who still didn't understand him, not yet. It would have been all right if he'd just been with Connor and James for a few weeks. But not a whole summer.

But what if they need you for the whole summer? What if they want you there for the whole summer?

Snape abruptly let go of his hand and sat back. "I want you to stay here," he told Harry. "You want to stay here. So you will stay here." He released his breath in small catches, hitches that seemed to stick on his teeth and tongue. "I am not...adverse...to letting your brother and father visit, so long as they do it when I am with you."

Harry jerked his head up and stared at him, so fast that he hurt his neck. "But you said that you were at the beginning of summer," he said. "You said that you wouldn't let them visit."

"Things have changed," said Snape, raising his eyebrows, as if Harry should take it for granted that he could change his mind, even though he'd almost never done it before. "In particular, I have been without your company for nearly two months, and I have found communication by letter an insufficient substitute. If you wish to stay here, and you wish to have your brother and father visit you, I see no reason why you should not have both."

Harry stared at him, waiting for the catch. Snape's face remained bland, but as open as Harry had ever seen it.

"I—you really mean this?" Harry asked, testing. "You won't change your mind later and not let them visit?"

Snape shook his head slowly. "I swear by Merlin that I mean it, Harry," he said. "Of course, I will supervise the visits, and restrict them by length, and they will be dependent on the politeness of the Potters as well as my own. But you matter more to me than an old hatred."

Harry knew his face was blazing, and he fought back the temptation to cry. This was a day for smiling, instead. He let Snape see his fierce grin, rather than ducking his head to hide it, and said softly, "Thank you. That's what I want, then."

"Then you shall have it, Harry," said Snape, and rose to his feet. "You will want something to eat, now, and another potion."

Harry fell back on his pillows and half-closed his eyes, listening to Snape move out of the room. He spent a few minutes, until Snape

returned with the food, trying to reason out the tumult of emotions within him.

This is really brilliant, was the best he could come up with.

Snape watched Harry silently from the doorway in the moments before he departed to get a tray. The look on Harry's face had been worth the promise, as he had thought it would be when he made it. He had set himself a rough challenge, but he was determined to overcome it. If nothing else, he could treat it as a competition with James Potter. He was sure the man would crack and be rude before he would.

And it is not as if this is forever, he noted to himself, his glance lingering on a pile of books that had become quite familiar to him, and the parchment and quill ready and waiting for the next letter he would write. Only until a better solution can be found, and James and Lily and Albus all together can be made to pay for their crimes.

Interlude: And Then There Were More Letters

July 31st, 1994

Potter:

I must congratulate you on finding an original way to try and get your son killed. Quite ingenious, really, to have him employ his magic outside the wards of the house you are so proud of and then go alone to meet goblins and Death Eaters.

Death Eaters? you will say. I did not send him to meet Death Eaters.

Nevertheless, Death Eaters were there, and they found him. Evan Rosier used the Blood-Burning Curse on him. If you paid any attention during the First War, you will have heard of this curse and its effects. Of course, I must conclude that you never paid any attention during the First War, as otherwise you would have forbidden Harry to leave Lux Aeterna at all while there was any possibility of Death Eaters anywhere nearby. That would require you to have a grain of common sense and a modicum of love for the boy, as well, but observation power must come first.

Harry would have died were I not there. I fetched him, took him to Spinner's End with me, saved his life, and brought him back to Hogwarts.

He is safe now. He will be safe as long as he is with me. He will never be safe for as long as he is with you. He will stay with me the rest of the summer. Dumbledore will not interfere, and you know it.

If you behave, I may let you visit my ward once or twice before the term begins.

Professor Severus Snape.
August 1st, 1994

Snape:

I am glad to hear that Harry is safe. I am always glad to hear that Harry is safe, no matter what else you may think of me.

I would not have let him go alone to meet the goblins, but he insisted. He said that they had told him they would not meet with him if he came with any other wizard, and since he seems so intent on being vates, I yielded. I did not think about the consequences of his magic burst. I did not think it was so strong that Dark wizards could find it from dozens or hundreds of miles away.

I am his father, Snape. If I go to the Ministry and challenge you for legal control of him, who do you think will win?

I will accept that Harry needs to rest, probably for today as well as whatever time he spent with you yesterday. Tomorrow, I will come to fetch him, and I expect you to return my son to me, alive and unharmed.

James Potter,

Master of Lux Aeterna.

August 1st, 1994

Potter:

You are not behaving. You will not see Harry tomorrow, or for at least a week, unless he asks to see you. And even then, I will supervise the meetings.

You should have thought of the consequences of leaving him alone, Potter. You did not, and you are sorry. Is that not what you always say? Always you come too late, after your wife has hurt Harry, after Dumbledore has hurt him, after your friend Black has hurt him, after Death Eaters have hurt him, and wail your apologies. That is not good enough. What Harry needs is a guardian who can keep up with him and at least try to understand him, and you are not prepared to do either.

Harry is still asleep. When he wakes, I fully intend to make this the happiest summer he has ever spent. Not that that will be very difficult.

By all means, Potter, approach the Ministry and ask them to put my ward back into your incompetent care. I think you will find that most requests concerning Harry have a way of vanishing into a maze of forms in triplicate.

Professor Severus Snape.
August 1st, 1994

Draco:

I wanted to reassure you that Harry, though attacked by Death Eaters yesterday, is currently well and resting in a room attached to my own at Hogwarts. He will be spending the rest of the summer with me. You are welcome to visit in two days, when Harry should have awakened from the potions needed to spare him the effects of the Blood-Burning Curse.

Professor Severus Snape.
August 1st, 1994

Rufus Scrimgeour
Auror Office

Ministry of Magic

Dear Auror Scrimgeour:

I thought you might like to know that James Potter will no doubt be shortly approaching the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, to request that guardianship of Harry Potter be transferred back to him. As I know that you have cause to regard Harry favorably, and have approved my guardianship of him besides, this issue might be of interest to you.

Favorably,

Professor Severus Snape.
August 2nd, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

That's awful! Is he awake? Is he able to receive visitors yet? Are there any side-effects? Where were his brother and his father and his werewolf when that happened? Probably behind their wards like the cowards they are! Why didn't you stop by Malfoy Manor and Apparate with me, too?

My mother and father are beside themselves. At least, my mother is, and my father looks as if he could be. I don't think I have to tell you how many of their separate hopes and ambitions ride on Harry, and if they plan to stand against the Dark Lord, they need him in other ways.

Tell Harry that he'll get a hug when he sees me, and a bunch of sweets, and then he won't move for the rest of the summer without someone being there with him. I need to know if I can come to Hogwarts for an extended stay, Professor Snape. Please say yes. He needs someone with him, and while I trust you and know that you can handle Harry, you'll have potions brewing work to do. I need to be with Harry. Please say yes. I am going to ask my parents if they'll agree to let me stay at Hogwarts until the term begins.

Your elegant student,

Draco Malfoy.
August 3rd, 1994

Dear Draco:

Harry is currently awake, and has been since yesterday. We have had a slight argument about him returning to his relatives, but Harry has accepted that he will stay with me. He has granted me permission to say that he was going half-mad at Lux Aeterna, and

much prefers the intimate company of Slytherins, when he must spend large amounts of time around anyone at all.

I think it would be best to wait a few more days before asking Harry about visitors. He needs the time to relax. He will have visits with his father and brother as well, if they come to deserve them, but be assured that I will supervise those visits. His father and brother and Lupin were all inside Lux Aeterna's wards. He went alone to meet with goblins as a vates, and that was the cause of his injury.

I did not stop by Malfoy Manor because I was concerned with saving Harry's life, first and foremost.

You may not stay with us for the rest of the summer. Harry needs time to himself as well as with me, and I know you have already said that you would not allow that. Be assured, he is safe, and does not venture out of Hogwarts. However, once Harry feels like it, visits every other day are not out of the question.

Be assured of one thing, however. He will not return to the custody of his father, not while I am still alive.

Professor Severus Snape.
August 4th, 1994

James Potter
Lux Aeterna

Dear Mr. Potter:

I must express my deep concern that your serious question, regarding reversing the guardianship of Professor Severus Snape over your son, Harry Potter, has gone unaddressed for two days. I have spent that long researching the specifications of the case, since I could not remember them; it has been months since the files have been looked at. As well, the necessary forms have been misplaced. You see, the Department of Magical Family and Child Services recently suffered the loss of its master filer, who was sacked for accepting bribes, and no one else knows the filing system as he did.

We are extremely sorry for the confusion. However, as the guardianship was approved and not contested even when Harry Potter's official residence was changed to Lux Aeterna, we believe little harm can be done in continuing to leave the boy where he is for now. We are still searching for the necessary forms, and will send them to you as soon as we have them in hand.

Regretfully yours,

Rufus Scrimgeour

Head of the Auror Office.
August 4th, 1994

Snape, you slimy bastard:

I know that you've got an ally in the Ministry somewhere! The sacking of the secretary is too great to be coincidence. Who would have thought a half-blood Slytherin's reach went so high up?

I am going to find a way to get Harry away from you. Be assured of that.

James Potter.
August 5th, 1994

Potter:

Dear dear. It seems that you haven't behaved well enough to earn a visit with Harry yet.

Professor Severus Snape.
August 7th, 1994

Dear Harry:

I know that Dad said I shouldn't write to you, because you'd probably show the letter to Snape, but I want to.

I think I understand why you left, and why we weren't doing that great a job. Hermione was right, and I should have asked you about stuff more. I saw that you were unhappy a few days ago, but when I asked and you said nothing was wrong, I just let it go. I should have asked about it a little more. Sorry about that.

Was it something I did? I can try to make it up to you if you want. Was it something Dad did? I can try to get him to apologize.

I'm very, very glad the Death Eaters didn't kill you. That sounds stupid, I know, but that's all I know how to say about it.

If Professor Snape won't let Dad and me visit you before school starts, will you at least be able to make the Quidditch World Cup? I think it's on the 25th of August. Wait, let me look at the calendar...yes, that's it! Snape could come with you, if he wants. I find it awfully hard to imagine him enjoying a Quidditch World Cup, but I find it harder to imagine him letting you go anywhere alone. Dad and Ron and Ron's family and I are all going to be there.

Please give Professor Snape a formal thanks for saving your life.

Love,

Connor.

August 9th, 1994

Dear Connor:

I've been doing marvelously, thank you. And no, it was nothing either you or Dad did. I simply didn't have enough time to do everything I wanted to do at Lux Aeterna, and I didn't have all the books I needed to do research and brew potions and so on.

It's been brilliant here. Snape nursed me back to health as well as saved my life, and he's let Draco visit me, though he doesn't let me

go outside. I find that I don't mind it so much. We're discussing Potions theory instead. Hermione would kill to hear some of the things he's sharing with me. Wait until I tell her!

I've given your thanks to Professor Snape. He grunted.

It took me a while to persuade him about the Quidditch World Cup, but he finally agreed, as long as I stay with him at all times I can and in the vicinity of another adult the rest of the time. The Malfoys are going to go, so I'll have them as extra protection. And you ought to see Draco. He's been taking lessons from Crups, I think, the way he guards me and whips his wand out the moment anything threatens me. He fried a wasp the other day because he thought it might sting me. I think I'll be perfectly safe.

See you on the 25th! And tell Dad not to worry too much. I really have been happy.

Love,

Harry.

Chapter Five: Never Trust A Rosier As Far As You Can Throw Him

Harry stretched out carefully, with both his body and his magic. He knew what he would encounter, since he'd encountered it many times in his rooms already, but he wanted to feel it again.

Silence and peace met his magic. No one else was in the rooms. There was no one he had to worry about serving or doing things for, no one he had to worry about protecting, no one who might need something from him. He had a soft divan beneath him, cradling his shoulders and back, and making the large book on calming Potions—he still didn't believe they couldn't be improved—that he was reading comfortable, even though it rested on his upper chest. The rooms were still.

He had never been able to get that sense of stillness at Lux Aeterna. He was always aware of something. It could have been Connor, or James, or Remus, or one of the many magical artifacts in the house. Whatever he felt, he just wasn't able to relax.

Here, he could.

Harry rolled his head sideways on the pillow and closed his eyes. He knew that Snape was in his potions lab just beyond these rooms, striving to perfect one of the secret projects that he'd refused to let Harry help him with. He knew that Draco was visiting in a few hours. He knew that tomorrow, they were going to the Quidditch World Cup, and he would see his family again.

But for now, he could calm himself.

If no one was near him, there was no one whom he had to worry about protecting.

Harry let out a small sigh. He didn't mean to do it, since he still had his glasses on and the heavy book resting on his chest, but he did it. His breathing evened, and he slid into sleep, one of his hands just barely remembering to steady the book so that it wouldn't slide to the floor with a thump and wake him up.

Snape entered Harry's library intending to ask him if he wanted to practice his Disillusionment Charm potion—he at least knew, now, not to mix the liondragon scales and the demiguise hair, which he had indeed been doing—but paused at the sight of him asleep. His face looked unlined, and his scar, though revealed by the fall of his fringe, for once wasn't glowing bright red or bleeding, both of which it had done numerous times since Harry had come to live with him.

Snape knew he should probably wake Harry and convince him that sleeping on the bed was more comfortable than the divan. If nothing else, the position his head was in, half-dangling off the pillow, would give him a crick in his neck when he woke.

He didn't have the heart.

Silently, before the mere presence of his magic could wake Harry, he stepped gently backward out of the library and closed the door. Then he moved towards the Floo. He would firecall Malfoy Manor and tell Draco to hold off on visiting for at least another hour.

He could content himself with the knowledge that this had indeed been the happiest summer that Harry had ever spent. He had watched his ward's face grow calmer and calmer in every moment he spent here, and the odd dance of guardianship had grown easier and easier as they practiced at it. Harry did take well to restrictions when Snape could explain them to him, and if Snape sometimes had to use emotional blackmail to get him to rest or slow down, the need for that lessened as the days passed. Harry had laughed at Draco's protectiveness and frowned at potions and discussed magical theory with academic passion as well as with an eye to what the spells could eventually be useful for.

Snape wished he could forget the curse that had made Harry spend his summer like this in the first place, and that it was ending tomorrow, and that Harry should have been able to have a summer like this every year, if it was what he wanted, and that Harry was only fourteen years old and already a soldier.

He shook his head as he made the firecall. He did have to face up to reality, and pockets like the hour of sleep he was preserving for Harry were only that, pockets of softness scattered in a hard world that was anything but forgiving of them.

But for now, he would preserve this one.

Harry blinked and gasped as the tug of the Portkey, a small coin passed from hand to hand in the Three Broomsticks, released him at last. He moved at once out of the way of the rest of the arriving witches and wizards; a large portion of Hogsmeade's residents was attending the Quidditch World Cup, and many of them had chosen to come to Madam Rosmerta's pub for their Portkeys.

Snape steadied him at once with a hand on his shoulder, and glanced around with the faint sneer on his face that Harry was learning to expect. "Disgraceful," he muttered. "No security at all, of course."

Harry rolled his eyes. The day was, rather, brilliant with more security spells than they'd had any right to expect, given the wide-open nature of the place and the fact that people would need to wander in and out of the Quidditch area at will.

The grass around them was thick enough that Harry could feel it like a cushion beneath his feet as he walked, and the voices of wizards and witches were continual and loud, mingled with the cries of children. Harry saw families he recognized and families he didn't, some of the parents hoisting small children to their shoulders as if that would help them see the game, which wasn't happening yet, a little better. He watched a young witch patiently spelling a tiny girl's teeth back to white from blue, while her slightly older brother stood next to her and looked innocent of the magic that had turned them way. Harry, tuned to adults' emotions, shook his head when he saw the witch's tightening face. She'd be punishing the boy in a moment, all his protests to the contrary.

He turned around, scanning the rows of tents, some of them with absurd flags trailing in the breeze. They bore family coats of arms, the symbols of the Ministry or Diagon Alley businesses, sometimes the image of an award if the wizard or witch inside had received one.

Harry blinked and cocked his head, his gaze darting over the bunting once more. More family coats of arms than there should be, he thought, slowly. I don't even recognize some of them. People are digging out old and obscure symbols they have no reason to be proud of any more.

Why?

The answer came to him almost at once. The symbols were those of minor pureblood families, so sunken into obscurity that the only thing really separating them from any other wizard in the world was their blood status. They had the same social standing and amount of money as any Muggleborn, and no wizards powerful enough to be Lords or inventors of wonderful spells had been born among them. Pureblood families like the Malfoys and the Blacks, who had managed to retain prestige, money, homes, and reputation, were fairly rare.

Yet those minor families had chosen to drag out the coats of arms that perhaps only Crazy Aunt Mildred had truly cared about, and display them on their flags.

It was a declaring of allegiance, Harry thought, his mind tuned to an entirely different sort of dance than a young witch's impatience now. These were people who wanted to remind other wizards and witches that, in fact, yes, their family was pureblooded, thank you very much. They might not have anything much to show for it, but damn, they were going to proclaim it.

Why would they be want to be known as pureblooded?

One possible answer: because of what could happen to them if someone were to think they weren't.

Harry breathed carefully. He looked up to find Snape's gaze on him, his guardian already understanding something was wrong. Snape asked the question with his eyes, and Harry nodded to the flags. Snape's gaze darted after his, and it took him only a moment longer to understand what had concerned Harry. Of course, it would, Harry

thought. Snape hadn't been raised around the pureblood symbols, and wouldn't know immediately which ones were recognizable.

And then Snape surprised him by thinking of something Harry hadn't.

"Stay close to me," Snape whispered, as they began to walk through the lines of tents to the pavilion where they were supposed to meet the Malfoys. "Absolutely close, Harry, do you understand? At the first sign of trouble, we will Apparate back to Hogsmeade. None of this nonsense about Portkeys. I will simply take you in a Side Along Apparition. And keep your shields on your magic."

Harry blinked at Snape, and then firmed his mouth. Yes, he did understand. The Daily Prophet last year, thanks to Rita Skeeter, had reported on his outburst of magic at the Quidditch game, and circulated rumors about him, including that he was a Parselmouth and had somehow been involved in the attacks on other students during his second year. Many people knew something about him, even if it was only a rumor and a vague sense that he was powerful. It would be best to keep his head down and his magic concealed as much as possible.

It didn't entirely work, he saw as they walked. A few of the people twitched their heads to look at them, and a low murmur spread in their wake. Harry didn't meet the stares, though, and used a breathing pattern to calm herself when he was about to panic at the thought of wizards and witches staring at him. He could handle this. Really. It wasn't all that difficult.

Not at all.

"Harry! You came!"

Harry was able to look up and smile, as they at last neared the elegant ice-blue pavilion the Malfoys had set up. Draco bounced towards him and enveloped him in a tight embrace. Harry hugged him back, amused. They'd only seen each other yesterday, but Draco acted as though each and every absence were some new opportunity for Harry to slip away from him.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry let Draco go swiftly and stepped back, snapping up his magic around him. He hadn't noticed Draco's father standing behind him.

Careless, he reprimanded himself, meeting Lucius's gaze. How many times do you need to be told to remember your surroundings, Harry? This is the second time in as many months that something has surprised you like this.

Lucius Malfoy looked much as he had the last time Harry had seen him, last Christmas, if one excused the lack of a handprint on his face. He leaned on a cane with a silver serpent's head, his robes the old sky-blue ones of celebration. They weren't much lighter in color than the pavilion's cloth, Harry couldn't help noticing. Lucius's eyes were calm, his face as cool, as ever.

“Mr. Potter,” Lucius repeated. “Since I was to see you today, I thought I would present my midsummer gift in person. Forgive me the lateness, as it is less than a month until the next exchange, but I wanted to consider my response very carefully.” He gave a smile that moved his mouth in odd directions, and reached towards his robes.

Abruptly, his eyes narrowed, and looked past Harry's shoulder. “I promise I am not going to hex him, Severus,” he said.

Harry glanced up. Snape had his wand drawn and pointing at Lucius. He didn't move or lower his wand, even when Harry hissed at him.

“The last time you were near my ward but one, Lucius,” he whispered, “you did damage to his mind that it took months to reverse. Forgive me if I find it hard to forgive you.”

Exasperated, Harry wondered if Snape held grudges against everyone in the universe. He reached up and tugged firmly at his mentor's arm until Snape looked at him. Harry stared back. “The last time I saw him,” he said, “not the last time but one, he gave me a truce-gift that exposed his neck to me. Besides, sir, Mr. Malfoy was the indirect cause of my breaking with my mother at last. I would

never have gone home at Christmas if not for him, and that means that I would never have summoned the justice ritual.”

Snape did not look as though this were a convincing argument.

Harry shook his head at him. “This is a truce-dance, sir. You can’t interfere in a truce-dance.” He turned to look at Lucius, noting with approval that Draco had stepped aside and stood silent all this while. He was learning, then, probably from his intense study of pureblood manners and rituals. It was bad manners, very bad manners, to interfere in a gift exchange, especially this late in the truce-dance. In fact, Snape and Draco were being accorded an immense honor in witnessing the exchange at all. Harry decided not to point that out to Snape, though, since he wouldn’t be sensitive of the honor. Harry lifted his chin. “You said that you had a gift for me, sir,” he reminded Lucius, never looking away from him.

Lucius gave him a faint, cold smile. Harry smiled back. He enjoyed this dance with Lucius. They were allies, and it would be a long time, if ever, before they were friends. That meant they had to operate in the dancing ground laid down by ritual and tradition, and that meant no unnecessary attention paid to Harry or suddenly shifting emotional relationships. It was complicated, yes, but it was a complicatedness that was unlikely to change.

“I did indeed, Mr. Potter,” Lucius replied, and pulled the gift from his robes this time, slowly, in deference to Snape’s snarl. Harry expected to see a folded piece of parchment, a return list of Lucius’s ambitions and hopes for the one he had sent him in June, and rather blinked when Lucius extended a slender silver chain with something blue on the end instead. Harry accepted the object and peered at it.

The stone was clear, thought with the blueness actually darting beneath the surface of the facets instead of burning in the heart of it like a diamond, and almost the color of Lucius’s robes—

Of course, Harry thought.

—and egg-shaped. It made a faint buzzing noise as it hung on the chain, and Harry could sense that it had magic, though the magic was

faint and old. He looked up at Lucius and waited patiently for an explanation.

“From the Malfoy family treasures,” Lucius said casually. “A gift of defense and protection, once handed down from heir to heir. It expended most of its magic on defending my father from a Cruciatus Curse when he was fourteen. Since then, we have kept it, as a sentimental reminder more than anything else.” He raised an eyebrow. “But, of course, a reminder of how fierce the Malfoys can be in defense of their own, as well.”

Harry understood in a moment. Lucius had chosen to complement Harry’s own midsummer gift, not match it exactly. As Harry had sent a gift that looked forward to the future, Lucius had sent one that looked back to the past.

And one that bound Harry more and more tightly, not just to Lucius, but to Lucius Malfoy.

Harry wondered what the man had expected as a reaction. Whatever it had been, it didn’t appear to be Harry casually lifting the pendant and dropping the stone to rest against his own chest as he linked the chain around his neck.

“You accept, then, Mr. Potter?” Lucius asked.

“Of course, Mr. Malfoy,” Harry said. “It would be a pity if I did not, after all the dancing we have done so far.”

“Harry.”

Harry turned in relief as Narcissa stepped out of the pavilion, grateful that she was here now and he no longer had to pretend to a level of comfort with the situation that he didn’t feel. He trusted her to mediate between her husband and him. She, too, wore sky-blue celebration robes, but her face was much calmer than Lucius’s, her eyes watchful but gentle.

“Mrs. Malfoy,” said Harry, and kissed the hand that she extended to him. “I trust that you have been well? I know we have written, but I

haven't seen you for almost a month, and there are some things it would be unwise to put in letters."

Narcissa's lips twitched, and she nodded. "Indeed, Harry. Suffice it to say that I must be well, never having got as much exercise as this before. My legs are nearly worn out with all the dancing."

Harry felt Draco's arm settle around his shoulders, and his friend whispered into his ear, "Do you have to discuss this? Couldn't we go and buy Omnioculars for the game?"

Harry patted his arm, and turned back to Narcissa. "I hope you are not too tired to dance any more?"

"I do not think so," she said consideringly. "When one becomes tired of the waltz, after all, there is always the pavane."

Harry nodded. "When you are ready to stop dancing, Mrs. Malfoy, if you are ever ready, just let me know."

Narcissa blinked, once, twice. Then she said, "I would think that I can always find strength in my legs as long as I am still alive."

Harry studied her with narrowed eyes. She was in effect saying that she would continue trying to bring wizards and witches to his side, even though Harry had offered to let her debt to him for her mistakes be fulfilled. Of course, she had the motivation to protect Draco, as well, and that could be one reason that she didn't want to stop the danger she was putting herself in. But Harry would have thought there were less risky ways she could achieve Draco's safety.

Well. If she does want to risk herself, and chooses to do so, then I cannot interfere. Harry inclined his head. "If you say so, Mrs. Malfoy."

"I do," said Narcissa, and then smiled at Draco. "Do go find the Omnioculars, Harry, before my son drags you off your feet in searching for them. Severus, always a pleasure." She extended her hand for Snape to kiss, and then swirled back inside the pavilion. Lucius remained outside, watching them, as they walked away—well,

Draco walked, and Harry was tugged after him—with Snape behind them.

“Finally!” said Draco. “They’ve been talking about you and that damn gift for ages, Harry. I know that your truce-dance is important, but they seem to forget that you’re just fourteen sometimes and should be allowed to have fun.”

Harry just shrugged and remained quiet. He was here to have fun, as well as to meet with Connor and James, if they could even find them in the immense, shifting sea of people. Now wasn’t the time to give Draco another gentle lecture on how hard it was for him to have fun and how he didn’t want Draco exhausting himself in that futile pursuit.

“Now, where are the Omnioculars?” Draco craned his head. “You’d think there would a readily identifiable flag, but noooo....”

“Harry!”

Harry turned, smiling, at least as much as he could with Draco’s tight grip on his shoulders. After not hearing it for almost a month, his brother’s voice was welcome. Connor was running towards him, his fringe flapping up now and then to reveal his scar, and behind him came a mass of red hair that could only mean the Weasleys. Harry looked for James, but didn’t see him immediately.

Harry tried to step away from Draco so that he could catch Connor at the end of his dash in the kind of hug that his brother seemed to want, but Draco wouldn’t move his arm, and tightened it, making a small sound of protest, when Harry tugged again. Harry rolled his eyes and extended the one hand he could. Connor blinked at him, but then grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically.

“Harry!” he exclaimed again. “How have you been? Do you have Omnioculars yet? Who do you think will win, Bulgaria or Ireland? I know that Bulgaria has Viktor Krum, but I think the Irish work together better as a team—”

Harry tried to answer the questions, but the Weasleys were coming up just then, and he had to make his greetings to them. He’d only met

Arthur Weasley once, and the meeting had ended with a fight between him and Lucius. Harry eyed him apprehensively, but if Arthur still remembered that incident, more than two years ago now, he wasn't letting it influence the way he reacted to Harry. He nodded to him, and said, "Harry. Ron has told us that you're recovering nicely from the attack in July?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Weasley," said Harry, relaxing a bit.

"Yes, we heard about that," said Mrs. Weasley, bustling up beside her husband. "You poor dear!" She looked as if she would hug him, and there came an awkward moment when Harry felt like a rope in a tug-of-war contest, since Draco wasn't about to surrender him, and was getting more and more agitated the more Weasleys joined them. Mrs. Weasley settled for giving him a dimpled smile. "Death Eaters are the nastiest people I know," she added.

Harry held her eyes. They were kind, but behind the compassion was sorrow that she had a reason to feel. After all, Death Eaters had killed her brothers, even though it had taken five of them to do so.

Lucius Malfoy had been one of those five.

Harry sighed. Sometimes he felt as though he were walking through a world of contradictions, one of which was about to smack him in the face at any time now. "I'm completely recovered now, Mrs. Weasley, thank you," he said, and looked back for Snape. He found the professor standing slightly to one side, as though he didn't want to risk contamination. "Professor Snape saved my life. If not for his potions, the Blood-Burning Curse would have killed me." Snape raised his eyebrows, as much to say that that was an understatement of what had really happened.

"Evan Rosier is alive, then," Mrs. Weasley whispered. "I hoped that was a rumor. I see it wasn't."

Harry blinked at Snape and turned his head back. "Yes, he is," he said. "He took another Death Eater's place under a glamour of him for years. I'm sorry that you had to hear the news like this."

Mrs. Weasley sighed. "Well, we can only hope that the Aurors find the Death Eaters soon, and that they manage to find some way of caging them up again, now that the Dementors are gone." She shook her head, and managed to drive herself out of sadness as if on a spur. "Of course you know Ron," she added, as Ron joined Connor, "and Ginny." She gestured to her daughter, who had halted beside her and seemed to be waiting for her mother to be finished. Ginny rolled her eyes at Harry, as much to say that yes, they did know each other, and it hadn't been long since they'd seen each other, and wasn't this reintroduction ridiculous? Harry grinned back, while Mrs. Weasley, oblivious, chattered on. "And here are—" She stopped abruptly, and frowned at Arthur. "Where are the twins?"

Arthur's face took on a faint panicked expression as he turned around, scanning the grass behind him. "They were right here the last time I looked—"

"Here, Dad! Here, Mum!"

Fred and George was jogging towards them, wearing identical smug grins. Their pockets bulged and jingled. Harry wondered idly if he should tell them that the coins probably weren't real. With Ireland in the game, there would be leprechauns nearby, and a good deal of false gold.

"We just made—" one of the twins, probably Fred, began.

"A most profitable wager," the other, probably George, finished, and patted his robe pockets.

"You boys should not be making wagers!" said Mrs. Weasley, her voice rising slightly. "What are you thinking? What kind of example are you setting for Ron and Ginny? Did you think—"

Draco tugged hard on Harry's shoulders, which he had managed to nest completely under his left arm. "Come on," he said, whining. "I want the Omnioculars." From the glare he was giving the Weasleys, Harry thought it was probably time that they found some.

"Harry," said someone else before he could move.

Harry turned around slowly. James had come up behind the Weasleys, unnoticed, and stood there staring at him. He appeared to ignore both Molly Weasley's soaring temper tantrum and the long, careful glare Snape was giving him. He had eyes only for his son.

It will be all right, Harry reassured himself firmly. You saw the letters he sent Snape. You know that he wasn't ready for a reunion before now, and neither were you. You haven't damaged your relationship irreparably by leaving. It was better this way.

That didn't quell the guilt churning in his gut when he saw the look of almost-desperation in James's eyes.

"Hi, Dad," he said quietly. "How's your summer been?"

"Quieter and less exciting than it would have been with you there," said James, with a faint grin that vanished in the next moment. "But also lonelier. Connor and I missed you, Harry."

Harry tried to step forward, and found Draco's arms had dropped to his waist and held him firmly. He turned and glared at him. Draco blinked once, twice, then let him go.

Harry was able to walk forward and embrace his father, though it felt awkward, like hugging a stranger who might or might not pick him up and take him somewhere. James's hug felt no less awkward. Harry closed his eyes and tried to loose all his impatience and anger in one breath. You have nothing to be angry at him for. He did nothing wrong. Yes, he shouldn't have let you go outside the wards with only a Portkey for protection, the way that Snape keeps ranting on about, but neither of you knew. So why are you fidgety and anxious and uneasy around him?

Harry didn't know, which made it all the more awkward to hug James and then step back and smile at him. He knew the smile didn't reach his eyes. He wasn't sure what to do about it.

He glanced at Connor, and saw his brother watching them with an expression of sympathy on his face. Connor grabbed Ron's arm and whispered something in his ear, and then both of them and Ginny edged around the Weasley parents and went somewhere else. Mrs. Weasley, still absorbed in yelling at the increasingly sullen twins, didn't notice. Arthur followed his younger children, looking relieved.

Harry sighed. That was both a good move and a not-so-good one. It left him alone with Draco and Snape and James. On the other hand, it left James alone with Harry and Draco and Snape.

And, sure enough, as though he'd been waiting for a smaller audience, James began.

"Did you really choose to stay with Snape, Harry?" he asked, not bothering to look at Snape. "Or did he force you?"

Harry blinked at him, startled by the tone and direction of the questioning, and heard Snape laugh, an ugly sound, back in his throat. "As if I could make Harry do anything that he does not wish to do, Potter," he said.

"He's powerful," snapped James. "Doesn't mean that he's indomitable. And I know you, Snape. You do manipulate people. You tried to manipulate Harry by sending those letters to him in July. So I'll thank you to keep your nose out of my and my son's business—"

"He is not just your son," said Snape, in a voice as sharp as a shout, though much lower than one. "He was not ever your son. You chose to ignore him, Potter, and then he became my ward." His face wore an expression Harry had not seen on it before, an oddly focused and intent expression. It was not the murderous rage he had worn when he'd almost killed Sirius on the Quidditch Pitch last November, but something deeper and darker, something that frightened Harry. "If you had seen the truth before being forced to it, perhaps you would have some kind of claim on Harry. As it is, you have only the kind that he chooses to grant you."

"Merlin take you, Snivellus," James yelled, abruptly losing his temper. "You know why I didn't—"

He abruptly shut his mouth and stared at Harry, blinking. Harry saw Snape wince and touch his head in the next instant. He sniffed. He regretted giving Snape a headache as his power swelled out of control, but he didn't care. Both of them were acting childish, and he wasn't about to take it any more. A guardian and a father fighting over him? It was ridiculous. He was damn lucky to have both, and Harry knew it.

"Please shut up," he said, and then paused when they both stared at him in silence. "Well, that's accomplished." He could feel heads turning around him, and was aware of the Weasleys scratching at their shoulders as they felt his power manifesting, but he had to say this before he put his magic away. "I don't want either of you insulting each other in my presence. I know that I can't control what you write in letters, but this is different. This was supposed to be an outing so that I could see Connor and James one last time before school.

"Don't call him names," he snapped, turning to face his father. "Yes, I chose to stay with him, and yes, I was happy. I know you don't understand the connection I have with him, but that's because we forged it when you weren't there. Of course you're not going to bloody understand it." He felt a hand touch his shoulder, and leaned back into it instinctively. It was Draco, not Snape, and Draco moved when he did, turning to stay behind him as he faced Snape, so Harry allowed it to remain.

"And James is my father," Harry told Snape, meeting his eyes and not flinching before the cold fury he saw in those depths. He was coldly furious, too, if Snape wanted that, the grass silvering with frost beneath his feet. At least it wasn't as dramatic a reaction as would have happened last year, before he learned to control his rage. "I know you don't think I need to associate with him at all, but I want to. And you're making this harder than it has to be. You're the one who prides yourself on your understanding of the situation. You're the one who said I meant more to you than an old hatred. So stop it." He couldn't help the betrayed tone that crept into his voice on the last words. The hand on his shoulder tugged at him, and Harry leaned back against Draco, not taking his gaze from Snape's face.

Snape looked at him with fathomless eyes, then nodded once and looked at James. "A truce, then, Potter?" he asked. "We will only acknowledge each other's existence when necessary for Harry's sake, and ignore each other the rest of the time."

James was breathing fast, his face flushed, but as Harry watched, he seemed to master himself. He nodded once, the motion clipped. "Yes."

Harry sighed, and tucked his magic back behind his shields. He felt Draco inhale as though releasing a long breath, and smiled when he whispered in his ear.

"Can we see about the Omnioculars now? Please?"

Harry turned and walked away with him, along the path that Ron, Ginny, and Connor had taken. Behind them, he heard Molly Weasley draw in her breath and start on both James and Snape.

"Never seen such a disgraceful display—"

"If you please, ma'am," said Snape, his voice tight, "my ward should not be leaving without adult supervision."

"I'm perfectly happy to provide it, Severus," said Arthur Weasley, bustling back towards them from around a tent. "I can show the boys where to buy flags and anything else they might need for the game."

Draco looked disgusted at the thought of associating with a Weasley parent, but Harry said swiftly, "That would be brilliant, Mr. Weasley. Thank you."

He followed, and heard Molly's voice climbing. "Children, the both of you, and when that brave sweet boy has to act like the adult, then I think there's something wrong—"

Harry felt no sympathy with Snape whatsoever, and less for James. Both of them had acted like children, and Molly Weasley was a mother. She could scold children well enough to make the twins

sullen and angry. That meant she was exactly the right woman for the job in this particular situation.

“Are you all right?” Draco whispered, sliding his hand through Harry’s hair.

Harry sighed, and this time managed to release all the tension. “Yeah. Come on.”

“That was a Wronski Feint.”

“That was not a Wronski Feint,” Harry argued right back, adjusting his Omnioculars so that he could keep track of Viktor Krum as the Bulgarian Seeker angled after the Snitch again. “He pulled out of the dive too soon. You could see the way that he was trying to fool his opponent, and that means that it’s not a Wronski Feint. The Feint has to work.”

“But it did work,” Connor argued, pointing to the way the Irish Seeker circled after Krum like a loon with one wing. “See?”

“Not that well,” Harry said, and pulled the Omnioculars from his face so that he could see his brother more clearly. “He tried, yes, but that’s not the same thing as succeeding. You should know,” he added. Connor had attempted the Wronski Feint the first week they were home, and promptly broken his arm. James was luckily good enough with medical magic to heal that.

Connor made a rude face at him. “He is the greatest Seeker in Europe,” he said.

“When he can pull off a proper Wronski Feint, then I’ll agree,” Harry sniffed, and put his glasses back to his face.

So far, the game had gone well. Draco had wanted to sit in the Malfoy box. Connor had wanted to sit with the Weasleys. Harry had compromised by finding them seats in a row a short distance from the Malfoy box. They could see Narcissa and Lucius if they just glanced back, and Draco was sitting at one end of the row, so that, as he’d

complained to Harry in a low voice, “none of the unwashed Weasels can touch me.” Harry had pushed him on the shoulder for that one.

The game was taking place over a large Quidditch Pitch in the hollow below them, the grass smoothed with magic and the hollow’s sides Transfigured into seats. Harry approved of the arrangement. They could see all the action without straining their necks, and, thanks to the Omnioculars, replay the events in minute detail if they were questionable in some respect. So far, Krum really had been playing remarkably well, but the rest of the Bulgarian team was too used to depending on him, and flopped about in the air. The Irish team kept stealing the Quaffle and scoring handily.

A roar brought Harry’s attention firmly back to the game, and he lifted his Omnioculars. He could see Krum arrowing downward, his body bent over his broom, his hand extended in front of him as though trying to capture an elusive Snitch just ahead of him. The Irish Seeker was following, desperately trying to catch up, and obviously knowing he wouldn’t be able to.

Harry felt a smile hovering on his lips. He heard Connor cry out beside him, “That’s a Wronski Feint!”

Not exactly, Harry thought, and watched as Krum abruptly angled out of his dive and up towards the Snitch, which had always been hovering just above the Pitch. His hand reached out and handily took it from the air.

It took everyone, including Lynch, the Irish Seeker, a moment to realize what had happened, so thoroughly had Krum’s dive distracted them. Then they roared, and the roars grew louder when the Irish team were proclaimed the winners, never mind Krum’s catching of the Snitch, because they’d managed to score more points with the Quaffle. Harry shook his head and lowered his Omnioculars to his lap.

“You need more help recognizing a feint when you see one,” he told Connor helpfully. “I could show you.”

“Shut up,” said Connor, and shoved him so hard that Harry almost topped on to Draco. Harry laughed and sat back up, though the arm

Draco had wrapped around his shoulders wouldn't allow him to retreat far. Harry felt Snape shift uneasily in the seat behind him, but ignored him. His mentor had to be able to tell the difference between actual harmful shoving and the horseplay of brothers, and it looked as though he could use the practice. "It's not as though you could have done that."

"Could too," Harry insisted.

"Show me when we're at school then," said Connor.

"I will—"

Fuck!

The voice in his head wasn't his own, and it was all the warning Harry had before the scene, bright with the whizzing robes of the Irish team as they performed their victory lap, darkened abruptly with a burst of malevolent green. Harry felt his scar burst into fire, too, and reeled back in his seat, one hand clapped to his forehead. He heard Draco shout, but wasn't sure if it was the result of the way he'd moved or the fact that he looked like he was in pain or something else.

Harry's eyes rose and fastened on the source of the green light. He already knew what he would see, but it was one thing to envision it, and another thing entirely to witness the enormous Dark Mark hovering over the Pitch. He could hear the screams around him edging from confusion into panic.

An amplified voice, too distorted by the loudness for Harry to recognize it, boomed around the Pitch. "Let's have some real fun, shall we? Adflo ventum dirum!"

The field darkened further. Harry could feel the air around him whirling, the magic dancing in it, drawn towards the center of the Pitch. He felt the wind being sucked out of his lungs, the harsh pressure in his chest as he struggled to get enough air to breathe, the building desperation as his ears began to ring.

Then the spell let out the wind in a forceful crack, and it came flooding back over them.

And Harry felt the fear begin.

It attacked the minds of everyone around him, and prompted screams of panic from them. The panic turned quickly into terror, and in some cases into sounds of rage, and in other cases into mindless grunts and growls of the kind that animals might make. Harry felt, as if from a distance, the spell attempting to work on his own thoughts, to tip them towards fear and anger.

He didn't let it work. He brought up his Occlumency shields, furiously resisting, and felt the wind slam into them and back out of his mind the way that Connor's compulsion ability did. Snape was snarling behind him, a wordless sound, but not mindless, and Harry knew he must have resisted the same way.

Draco, on the other hand, was struggling beside him, seeming torn between getting his wand out to hex someone and running in fear. Harry grabbed his wrists and thought Ventus firmly, holding his eyes. He felt a clean wind of his own run out of his eyes and into Draco's mind, grabbing and strangling the ill-omened one. Draco let out a loud gasp, then sagged against him.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"The Ill Wind curse," said Harry, glancing around the Pitch. He could see people tearing into each other, or trampling each other as they ran, or throwing their own wands away as the spell convinced them they were snakes or strangling vines or something else equally horrible. Connor and the Weasleys were already gone. "I've heard of it, but I never realized it was like this." He grimaced, and glanced at Snape. "Can you protect yourself and Draco while I change things?"

"Harry," Snape ground out, his eyes so angry that he looked half-human at best, "my first priority is your safety, and you know that." He reached out as if he were going to settle one hand on Harry's shoulder and prevent him from moving. "There are Death Eaters here. We must move you."

Just one, Regulus's voice whispered in Harry's thoughts. Just the one. I can feel him. Rosier. He's waiting for you. The western side of the Quidditch Pitch.

"Regulus says there's just one," Harry told Snape, even as he turned his head. Sure enough, he could see a figure in a dark cloak standing motionless on the western rim of the hollow, a faint empty space around him even as people fled past him. Harry had to shout to make himself heard, but he never looked away from that single solitary figure. "Rosier. I can take him."

Snape shook his head, his eyes in constant motion, skimming around the Pitch. "No," he said. "No, Harry."

Harry gave him a faint smile. "I'm the only one who can stop this, and you know it, sir," he said, and then slammed magic into his limbs, tearing free of both Draco's and Snape's holds on him. He heard them yell. He didn't particularly care. He was already gathering his magic to Apparate, keeping his gaze fixed on Rosier. He had no chance of getting through the sea of seats and the confused, roiling crowd if he didn't Apparate. His only real fear was that the Death Eater would run before he could get there.

He won't move, Regulus whispered to him. I've seen him like this. Once he's taken an interest in you, he doesn't run unless you convince him that you really are stronger. And it's been long enough since that day on the beach that I don't think he believes that any more.

Really? Harry couldn't help but ask sarcastically, even as he heard Snape begin the incantation for a full body-bind. He concentrated, and then the world around him rippled and squeezed him out again as though he were being born a second time, landing him with a crack on the western rim of the hollow.

The empty space around the dark-cloaked figure expanded to encompass him. The figure pushed its hood back, and it was indeed Rosier, and he was smiling.

“There,” he said pleasantly. “Now we shall not be interrupted. Accendo—“

Harry was already forming his magic in front of him, pushing it as a blade straight at Rosier’s chest. This was something he had thought he might be able to after reading some of Snape’s books on wandless magic. Rosier would have to shield against it, or it would pierce his heart.

Rosier abruptly winced, and gasped, and did a nonverbal spell that halted Harry’s push. He fixed Harry with a gaze into which some respect had fallen, nodding a bit. “Truly impressive, Harry. ‘Enter these enchanted woods, you who dare’. But I had forgotten that the warnings about darkness might also apply to me. You are a Dark wizard, aren’t you?” He was swinging his wand back and forth now, trailing sparks that might be harmless or the beginning of a curse, for all Harry knew.

Harry said nothing. He kept an eye on Rosier, but he was drawing his own strength in, too, tucking it close to his chest. What he had to use would be a simple spell, but incredibly powerful. He had to make sure it was just right, while defending against whatever Rosier threw at him.

Rosier raised an eyebrow, and that was all the warning Harry had before he was convulsing under Crucio.

“I tell Bellatrix she has no sense of adventure when she uses this,” Rosier said conversationally, from somewhere beyond the pain. “But sometimes the old methods are the best, don’t you agree? And since she isn’t here tonight, I think I ought to do this, just in remembrance of her.” His voice dropped into what was obviously a quote from a poem again. “ ‘Of dire wizardry no hint, save mayhap the print that shows hasty outward-tripping toes, heels to terror on the mould.’ They are all running in terror now, and when I repeat the spell, it will be more than that.”

Harry gritted his teeth and rolled under the pain, above it, not letting himself panic as he remembered how the Crucio in first year had broken his ribs, not needing Regulus’s whispered reassurances, not

letting himself think about anything but resisting the pain and then reaching out and casting the spell at the Pitch—

Finite Incantatem! He cried it silently, but with everything in him.

He heard the tenor of the cries from the Pitch change. The Ill Wind curse was gone. People were beginning to breathe normally again. They would wake up completely in a few minutes, with luck.

Meanwhile, the pain flooded him, since he no longer had a bulwark of determination to shield himself against it.

Harry howled, and screamed, and let the agony out any way he could. There was no point in trying to keep silent under torture. They would just have it out of you in the end, anyway, one way or another, and life was more important than pride. Harry concentrated on gathering up the magic inside. That wasn't hard. It would have been hard to think of anything but the writhing, shrieking pain in his chest.

"This is boring," said Rosier loudly, cheerfully.

The curse ceased, before Harry could do anything about it himself. He lay there, panting for a moment.

Then he brought his head up as a scorching hex came at him, and blocked that with a Protego, and then he was forcing himself to stand and confront Rosier, who danced to the side in a circle, his eyes wide and his face laughing.

"Strong for a child," he said. "Self-sacrificing for a Slytherin. That self-sacrificial side is probably going to get you killed, Harry, especially since the Dark Lord is returning." He gave the Dark Mark he'd cast a fond glance. Harry knew he could turn and see it hovering there, skull and snake.

Harry didn't reply. He thought Incendio, and Rosier's cloak caught on fire. Rosier whirled, dropped it from his shoulders, and continued his circling. At least, Harry thought, they had the clean light of the fire to combat the green horror of the Dark Mark.

“There are some people who will tell you that of course the Light will triumph, the way it always has, but Dark Lords have won before. I think one might win even if you could actually kill my Lord, Harry. After all, you’re awfully like him.”

Petrificus Totalus.

The body-bind failed to catch Rosier, who’d already lifted a shield against it. His face was lazy as he considered Harry, and then he grinned and gestured with his wand, murmuring, “Adsulto cordis!”

Harry blocked the heart attack spell with a shield, and replied with a nonverbal Tarantallegra that actually made Rosier dance for a brief moment before he dispelled it. He laughed then, and his face was open with honest enjoyment as he peered into Harry’s eyes.

“Beware of Moody,” he said.

Harry stared at him. “What?” he asked, despite his resolve not to speak to his enemy again.

Rosier tilted him a slow wink, whispered, “Enter these enchanted woods, you who dare,” and whirled to cast a spell at the Pitch. “Cremo!”

The intense fire that soared towards the sky from the seats and boxes had destroyed enough homes and safe places in the First War that Harry felt compelled to deal with it, and though he managed to calm the flames in a few seconds, the damage was done. By the time Harry turned back, Rosier had Apparated out.

He let out a harsh breath, and asked Regulus, Does he always do that?

Rosier doesn’t “always” do anything, said Regulus, his voice flat and angry. He’s completely unpredictable in his specific actions, Harry. And that warning, if you can call it that? What the hell did that mean? Alastor Moody is a respected Auror. He wouldn’t betray you to the Death Eaters, and it seems useless to encourage you to distrust him.

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes. Do you know why he might have wanted to come here tonight?

Mainly to frighten people, I think. That was the purpose of the Dark Mark in the sky and the Ill Wind curse, at least. But also to test you, it looks like. I don't know why. It's not as though he's going to abandon the Dark Lord and join you, and you wouldn't really want him on your side, anyway.

Harry snorted. No. He looked down at his trembling hand and sighed. Damn it, he'd been put under Crucio yet again, and though it couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, whatever it felt like, he just knew that Snape would be very unreasonable about all of this and insist on bundling him up again.

Can you feel Snape at all in the crowd? he asked Regulus, while swatting at his hair. There was an insect of some kind in it, but it fell and flew away at his swat. Harry closed his eyes. He could feel the fine trembling that was the aftermath of pain and shock creeping through his limbs, but he didn't want to lie down or faint. There would be time for that later, after he made sure that everyone who mattered to him was all right.

Right behind you, said Regulus, sounding just the tiniest bit amused. Climbing the ridge. Harry?

"Yeah?" Harry blinked and shook his head. He was getting black spots in front of his eyes. Damn Rosier.

Find me and put me back in my body as soon as possible, Regulus said. I can give you advice, but it's patently obvious that you need as many people to protect you as possible, and I'd rather be there fighting in body.

Harry started to respond, but Snape grabbed him by the shoulders then, spun him around, and Apparated. Harry blinked and shivered, then blinked again as he found them standing on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. He looked up at Snape in tired incomprehension.

"But what about Draco and—"

“Mr. Malfoy is fine,” said Snape, seizing his wrist. “I saw him reunited with his parents before I set out to look for you.” His eyes bored into Harry’s, intense and angry. “You promised me at the beginning of August that if you were ever in Rosier’s vicinity again, you would not seek him out.”

Harry blinked. He had made that promise, and easily, because he could not imagine a situation in which he would be close to Rosier again any time soon. “I’m sorry—“ he began.

“I’m very angry that you disobeyed me, Harry.”

Harry shivered. The voice was cold and dark, and promised plenty of awful things. “Um. Sorry?”

“You should be.” Snape leaned down and stared into his face. “You will remain in Hogwarts until term begins, bar any strictly necessary excursions, in which I will be with you at all times. Draco will not be allowed to visit you again before school starts. And I will require you to brew me as many boil cure potions as you can before September first.”

“But boil cure potions are boring,” Harry protested, before he could think better of it.

“Exactly,” said Snape, and then paused to study him. “What did he hit you with?”

Harry winced. “Crucio.”

“Detention for the first week of school, for not telling me at once,” said Snape evenly. “Now, come, Mr. Potter. I have potions that will reverse the effects of the Cruciatus Curse, as well you know.” He set off towards Hogwarts, not lessening his hold on Harry’s wrist. Harry put his head down and followed, sighing when he stumbled now and then over small, hidden hollows in the grass.

He knew Snape's anger was prompted by fear. He knew that he'd broken his promise. But still, what else could he have done? He was the only one who could have dispelled that Ill Wind curse.

But you could have done that without going to confront Rosier, Regulus muttered at him.

You were the one who told me that he was waiting for me! Harry exclaimed, unable to believe how unfair this was. I had to handle him!

No, you didn't, Regulus disagreed. And if I had known for sure what you would do, I wouldn't have told you where he was. What did your duel with him accomplish, Harry? Exactly nothing. You could have dispelled the curse and stayed safe.

But then he might have hurt someone else, Harry protested.

Instead, he hurt you, Regulus snarled. Oh, yes, that was a brilliant solution, Harry. Stop risking your life needlessly. And Harry felt the intense silence in his head that usually indicated Regulus had left and gone elsewhere.

It mirrored the silence outside as they reached their rooms in Hogwarts, Snape fed Harry his potions, and he went to bed. Harry lay awake for a while with his arms folded behind his head, staring at the flames and wondering if Connor was all right, and James, and the Weasleys.

He knew that he couldn't ask Snape right now. His guardian would refuse to answer, and his punishments would be raised.

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. Damn it, he'd just wanted to help, and it did seem as though the people around him were overreacting, but he probably should have been more careful.

He didn't know how to be, though.

He drifted into a restless, troubled sleep.

After the third attempt to pour himself a glass of wine had failed, Snape turned and hurtled the goblet into the fireplace. It broke with a

loud, satisfying crash, and he snarled, glad that silencing charms warded his rooms.

He sat down in his favorite chair and stared at the flames.

Was there no end to the trouble that Harry could get in to? Was there no way to protect him?

Snape closed his eyes. Strike at the root of the problem. That is what I must do. Punishments won't do it; I don't think that anything I can say will make much of an impact on Harry's behavior for long, unless I threaten to end the guardianship, and I cannot do that, not now. He would never believe me, anyway.

No, what I must do is change his attitudes, especially the one that says he is to be a weapon and a sacrifice, and it is therefore all right for him to risk his life. He does not think twice about the danger he goes into. Oh, he cares what we think, Draco and I, and he does not want to cause us pain, but in this case he weighed our welfare against the crowd's, and since we were safe and not the object of Rosier's attention, he saw no reason not to go into danger and try to stop it.

Another project for this year, then.

Ah, Harry. You are the most complicated person I have ever known.

A flutter of wings made Snape blink and look up. An owl had found its way through the hole in the wards that he left specifically for owls bearing parchment that was not enchanted in any way, and had landed on his table, waiting. Snape sighed and went to fetch a treat for it.

His heartbeat spiked sharply when he saw that the letter on the owl's talon bore a Ministry seal. He tore open the envelope and drew the parchment inside out.

August 24th, 1994

Dear Professor Snape:

It has come to our attention that your ward, Harry Potter, is a Parselmouth. One may be excused ignorance, but under the newly passed Ministry Edict 6.7.3. For the Control of Dark Talents, Mr. Potter is required to come to the Ministry and register himself as being in possession of a Dark gift. This is being done for the safety of everyone in the wizarding world, and I am sure that you will not refuse such a reasonable request. Please bring Mr. Potter to the Ministry to register no later than the first week of Hogwarts term. Unless he is registered, Mr. Potter will not be able to attend Hogwarts with Light wizard students.

Sincerely,

Dolores Umbridge,

Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic.

Snape dropped the letter and drew his wand, conjuring several light wooden figures in the space of a heartbeat. In a moment, a curse had destroyed one of them, frying it so severely that charred fragments slammed into the wall.

It was obviously a night for breaking things, and in the end Snape destroyed several dozen of the figures before he trusted himself enough to put his wand away and go to bed.

Chapter Six: Ministry on the Rise

“Here. Drink this.”

Harry blinked sleepily and managed to accept the vial that Snape held towards him. He swallowed the potion inside, and blinked again as it seemed to whip the cobwebs of drowsiness from his mind. He studied the vial in wonder. It hadn't tasted much different from an ordinary Pepper-Up potion, but the result was far more dramatic. “What was that?”

“Something to make you think more clearly,” Snape said. From the sharp look in his eyes, he'd had some himself already. “I need you awake and prepared. Today, we must go to the Ministry.”

Harry stared at him. “That's a strictly necessary excursion?”

Snape raised his eyebrows, and Harry glanced away with a flush. “Sorry, sir,” he said, and then noticed that Snape was carrying a folded newspaper in one hand. He pointed. “Does that explain why, sir?”

“In part,” said Snape. “If you were less well-known, I might try bribes or some other way of slipping you under the Ministry's insistence on registering you, but not now.” He gave Harry a disgusted glare and extended the Daily Prophet across the bed at him.

Harry picked it up, and blinked at the photograph on the front page. It showed the Dark Mark floating above the pitch at the Quidditch World Cup, which was no surprise, but it also showed two dim figures that he recognized as he and Rosier fighting their duel. The smaller one fell to the ground even as he watched. “Who took this?” he whispered. “Who could have been close enough to take this?”

He understood, in part, when his eyes fell on the headline and the byline.

BOY HERO DEFEATS DEATH EATER

By: Rita Skeeter

Harry groaned and buried his head in his hands. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes," said Snape, sounding remarkably like Draco when he'd brought Harry his Firebolt. "This story goes into immense detail." He'd moved around the bed, and jabbed a fingertip down in the middle of the column below the photo. Reluctantly, Harry picked up his glasses from the nearby table, slipped them on, and then studied the writing.

...When the Aurors arrived, they found the Ill Wind curse, used to great effect by the mysterious Death Eater on the World Cup crowd, already dissipated.

"We don't know who did this, exactly," said Kingsley Shacklebolt, a senior Auror for the Ministry. "But we know that every trace of the curse had been banished when we arrived. Someone used a Finite Incantatem most probably, but it would have to have been of immense power."

There is speculation among some of the Aurors that the caster of that spell was also Harry Potter, the boy who battled the Death Eater on the hill.

"I mean, it would make sense," said an Auror who gave her name only as Tonks. "Immensely powerful boy appears, duels immensely powerful Death Eater, and then causes immensely powerful Death Eater to flee. It sounds to me like he had the magic to make the spell do what he wanted it to do, too."

Sources whom we cannot reveal confirm that the Ill Wind curse did indeed seem to dissipate during Harry Potter's battle with the Death Eater.

Harry sighed and put the paper down, though he did wonder about that last paragraph. Most of the people under the effect of the Ill Wind curse would have been so confused and blurred in their thoughts by emotion that they couldn't have said for sure when the spell ended. "And I assume that most of the wizarding world has already seen this by now?"

Snape nodded, his mouth thin. "She also repeats the information that she has used in other stories from the last year—for instance, the fact that you are a Parselmouth. There are now many people who will know this as certain fact, or think they do, and many others who will have been reminded." He pulled a crumpled letter from his pocket and extended it to Harry.

Harry read it and sighed. "And so I have to register, since everyone and his sister knows I'm a Parselmouth," he muttered.

Snape nodded again. "With luck, it will be nothing more than signing a form confirming that you have the gift. However, I would rather move now, before there can be any fuss about a 'boy hero' and a Dark wizard not fulfilling this Ministry edict."

Harry nodded back to him, then realized with shock that he had completely forgotten to ask about Connor and the Weasleys and James. Snape had hit him so hard with the potion and the newspaper that it was understandable, but he still felt a bit of guilt as he asked, "Sir? Did everyone else get home safe?"

"There were some casualties from the crowd's trampling," Snape said quietly. "No one whom you know was among them."

Even knowing that Snape had probably phrased it that way to lessen his guilt, Harry still winced. If he hadn't showed off by dueling Rosier, then he probably could have dissipated the Ill Wind curse before it killed anyone, and there certainly wouldn't have been Skeeter's stupid story in the Prophet. He bowed his head.

"Harry."

He started. For some reason, he had been sure Snape had left the room. You really need to stop doing that, he reminded himself, and looked up at his guardian. "Yes?"

"It was not your fault," said Snape, enunciating every word the way he would Potions instructions in class. "You cannot save everyone. You are not the sacrifice for everyone. Remember that."

He held Harry's eyes until he nodded, then swept from the room, calling over his shoulder, "Prepare yourself for the Ministry, and make sure that you eat some breakfast. I will know if you have not."

Harry climbed out of bed, stretching his arms. He paused when he felt a brief restriction on his movements, and swatted at his hair, wondering if another bug was in it.

He found nothing, however, and after a moment the sensation faded. Harry shrugged. Probably from sleeping too tightly coiled up in the sheets.

Harry stuck close to Snape. He knew it was ridiculous, but he'd never been in a place so noisy as this part of London, and it was overwhelming him. Diagon Alley was much quieter. Here, there seemed to be people absolutely everywhere, including in corners where his eyes did not expect to encounter them, and many of them were yelling and laughing and dashing across streets and throwing things to each other or over their shoulders, as if they had no care in the world. It was a flat, sunny day, perhaps the last one of August, and obviously they intended to enjoy it as much as possible. Harry could appreciate that from the distance of a newspaper article or a book.

But, he wondered, flinching as a bottle flew over his head, do they have to be so enthusiastic about it?

"Here we are."

Harry blinked. He'd been walking with his head down for the past few minutes, and hadn't noticed when they turned into a street which was marginally quieter, though far dirtier than the norm. They passed a wall along which someone had drawn a careful, spiraling design in green and red, and someone else had drawn a blue hand scratched through it. ALL HAIL THE HAND, said another line of blue letters beneath that.

Harry shivered. This was as alien and dangerous a place as the Forbidden Forest, in its own way. At least he knew that he could use magic to save his life if he encountered a hostile creature in the

woods. He wasn't sure what remedy would work best for Muggles, and he was forbidden to use magic in front of them anyway.

Snape stepped into a tall but not very large box, drawing Harry with him. In front of them hung a device that Harry vaguely recognized from one of the Muggle picture books his mother had sometimes let Connor read. It was a telephone. Snape reached out, and, with a look of distaste, punched five buttons on it, in a sequence too fast for Harry to make out. He resolved to get Snape to tell it to him later.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

Harry squinted. He could just make out the shimmering trace of the spell that funneled the welcoming witch's voice through a spot in the air. It plunged past the telephone and into the ground. Harry raised his eyebrows. Ah, so the Ministry really is beneath the surface?

"Severus Snape and Harry Potter," Snape said sharply but clearly, the distaste for this whole ridiculous charade written all over his face. "Here to register Harry Potter as a Parselmouth."

There came a soft whirring sound, and two silver badges dropped into Snape's hand. He sorted through them, found Harry's, and handed it to him, pinning his own to his robes. Harry followed suit.

The phone box lurched and began to descend, startling Harry, but not as much as it would have if he hadn't discerned that the offices were underground. The ride wasn't long, and since Snape was obviously boiling under the surface, Harry decided he wouldn't say anything. The first person to talk to Snape was going to get a flood of vitriol, however carefully concealed.

The door of the telephone box opened, and Harry blinked. The room beyond was enormous, and flooded with light. There were more fireplaces than one person could ever need along both walls, and the ceiling was, for some reason, blue, with golden symbols. Harry scowled at it. He didn't think he could remember any pureblood family that used those two colors in such brilliant and garish combination, and now he could see why.

“This way, Harry.”

Snape strode determinedly down the middle of the room, leaving Harry to follow. He did, but paused as he saw the fountain ahead of them.

It was made of gold. That was the first problem; Harry saw no reason to use that much gold on anything, and so it just struck him as ostentatious. The second problem was the statues that made it up. A wizard, a witch, a goblin (quite obviously a southern one, and not a northern one), a house elf, and a centaur stood in what was probably meant to be a brotherly or comradely pose. What Harry mostly saw was the way that the house elf, goblin, and centaur gazed at the humans as though about to collapse and fawn at their feet.

He breathed deeply, relaxing his physical sight, and then staggered back and put a hand over his eyes. The room was flaring like the sun. There were at least three webs connected to the fountain, so brilliant that Harry knew they must be powerful. He had to pick his way carefully among the radiances, but he thought he made out a blue web, a golden one, and one that was either also golden or a pale orange, like the sky at sunrise.

“Harry? Harry!”

Harry came back to himself, and even managed to step away in time to avoid Snape’s reaching hand. He nodded to him. “I’m all right,” he whispered, and gestured at the fountain. “I just don’t like that very much.”

“The Fountain of Magical Brethren, it’s called.” Snape said it with a sneer, but Harry thought that was automatic. He was looking carefully at Harry now, as though trying to decide whether he needed to be taken back out of the Ministry.

Harry choked back the bitter laughter that wanted to rise out of his throat. “Yes, I suppose it would have to be.”

He gave the fountain a final glance, then shook his head and followed Snape down the room. He let the sight of the webs slide away again. He couldn't do anything about them right now, and doubtless the Ministry had alarms of some kind waiting to activate should he touch the webs or employ any magic powerful enough to break them. After he'd freed the Dementors, they would have been mad not to.

The room ended in a pair of golden gates, in front of which stood a bored-looking wizard behind a small stand. He nodded to them, and switched on a smile that didn't look natural on his face. "Greetings and welcome to the Ministry of Magic! My name is Eric. Let me register your wands for you." He held his hand across the stand.

Snape, though obviously reluctant, surrendered his own wand. Harry watched and practiced smiles and lost voices in his head, so that he would look more innocent when Eric turned expectantly to him.

"I, um, didn't bring my wand," Harry said.

He heard Snape's hiss. "What?"

"Well, we moved so fast this morning, I just forgot," Harry told him. And it was true. He often didn't use the cypress wand any more, though most of the time he still carried it. It was currently lying in a drawer of the table beside his bed. He shrugged at the guard. "I'm sorry. Can I still visit the Ministry?"

Eric chuckled. "Of course, son. Just remember to carry your wand with you!" He wagged his finger at Harry. "Little wizards like you will be snapped up otherwise!"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, while wondering why the Ministry had hired someone who would say something like that the morning after a Death Eater attack. "Thank you, sir." He nodded to Eric, and let Snape escort him through the gates, ignoring his mentor's hiss, of, "We will discuss this later." The important part of that sentence was the "later."

Eric called after him. "Oh! Sir! I forgot to tell you where you're going."

Snape turned around with barely controlled anger. "I assumed," he said, "as anyone would, that we will go to the second floor, because that is where the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is."

Eric abruptly seemed to shrink. "Um." He stared at his hands for a second, then shook his head. "No," he said, and blurted the next words so fast that Harry almost couldn't make them out. "Fourth floor, sir."

Harry felt the moment when Snape went absolutely still. Not even his hand on Harry's shoulder pressed down. He simply stood there, and then breathed, "What?"

"Yes, sir," said Eric, taking refuge in babble. "I thought it was unusual, but they said, they said it was official, and I said of course I'd tell the visitors like—like yourself, sir, and they said it made sense, and on one level I have to agree, because of course we don't want Dark wizards running around and using their powers, not that that means this boy is a Dark wizard, of course, I saw the story in the Prophet, I think he did some good last night, I think—"

"Come, Harry," said Snape, his voice clear as a diamond. "We are going to the fourth floor, and the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures." His hand clamped down this time, as he almost dragged Harry along to the lifts.

Harry set his feet and shook his shoulder, dragging it free of Snape's grasp in a moment. "Why are you so angry?" he asked quietly.

Snape turned on him. "They think you a magical creature," he hissed.

"No," Harry pointed out. "I don't think they do, at least not on the same level that they think of, say, goblins." He put aside thoughts of the fountain behind them, as it was only making him angry. "I think this is a public relations message. They want everyone else to think that a Parselmouth is a kind of dangerous magical creature, to be tolerated only if he registers." His mind was already speeding ahead, turning over the implications. He knew what the Ministry had wanted to do, but he was going to make it backfire on them if he could. At the very least, he could tell Fawkes about this, though he could not

understand what the phoenix would say in reply, and he would spread the word to other magical creatures. "I don't mind. I'm honored to be in the same place where they made Remus and Hawthorn and the other werewolves register, and once the house elves and the goblins hear about this..."

He looked up at Snape with a smile. "They might have been able to do nothing else that would help me so much in my work as vates."

Snape, he saw, was not smiling. Snape, he saw, was so far from smiling that his face looked as if he would curse the next person to cross his path. Harry shook his head.

"Don't you see?" he whispered. "They intended it as a humiliation, yes, a reminder of my 'proper place,' but that doesn't mean I need to take it that way. They can insult me only if I let them."

Snape stared hard at him. Harry stared back, and even relaxed his shields enough to let Snape read his mind with Legilimency if he wanted. He really was not bothered by this, not when his enemies had just handed him such a fine weapon.

Snape nodded once, and then said, as they headed for the lifts again, "Now, you will explain to me why you are walking about without your wand."

Harry winced. Yes, if he can't attack one target, he just goes for another.

"Sign here if the information on this form is correct."

Harry sighed and bent over the form in front of him, stretching out his cramped hand before considering the information, mostly basic: on which day he'd been born, the full names of his parents, the place of his birth, and so on. This wasn't as hard as he had thought it would be, but it was far more boring. He had to sign and complete many forms, often in triplicate. He was finding it harder to understand Scrimgeour by the moment. Not only did the man say he liked this stuff, he'd built up a reputation of truly liking it. How could he have stood the torture?

Snape stood behind him, arms folded across his chest. The cheerful young witch behind the desk kept shooting him glances that edged steadily from nervous to terrified. Harry understood. Snape didn't need to say anything. He could intimidate with a single glare.

He completed that form and handed it across the desk. While the witch considered it, Harry glanced around the office. It was open and airy, or it seemed that way, with high ceilings and multiple desks and windows that showed an impossible, magical vision of the sun soaring across a cloudless blue sky. Harry was not sure which division they were in; he had seen only a few wizards and witches wandering by, and no magical creatures. Most of them had paused as though wondering what Harry was doing there, or perhaps recognizing him from the photos later in Skeeter's story, but all of them picked up their pace the moment they spotted Snape.

The witch's warm voice brought Harry back to the present. "Excellent, dear. Now, just one more form, and we'll be done." She pushed the last, single, solitary paper to him across the desk. Harry felt his heart warm. This was tedious and boring and necessary, and after his realization that the Ministry classed him as a magical creature, nothing had been fun. He scanned the form quickly. It was only a few lines, but in legalese, so it took him a moment to work out what it meant.

He sat back, carefully, and put the quill down in front of him, flexing his fingers. The witch looked at him and tutted. "Sore hand, dear? That's all right. You can take a moment to relax before you sign."

Harry met her eyes calmly and said, "I'm not putting my signature to this."

The witch's mouth dropped open in a pretty picture of shock. She had dark hair and gray eyes that reminded Harry of Sirius's, at least in the amount of surprise they could hold. "Oh, but dear, you must. You've done so well with all the others! You'll need to sign this one, too. It's the final step in the registration." She gestured at the form and smiled, as though Harry could have missed that there were no other papers waiting under this one.

Harry stared at her. "I know that. But this form says that I'm not to speak to snakes again without risking a legal penalty from the Ministry. I'm not going to do that. I'm perfectly willing for the Ministry to know that I'm a Parselmouth and keep all my forms on file just in case a Parselmouth ever commits a crime—" that was the official excuse for the registration the witch had given him "—but I won't actually stop myself from using my gift. Did you make the werewolves sign a form to keep from transforming every month?"

The witch uttered a nervous titter. "Now, dear, you know that—that isn't the same thing. Lycanthropy is a disease, and they can't help being sick." She leaned forward confidingly. "They aren't normal wizards, anyway. But you are, dear. And you know the difference between right and wrong, don't you? And you want to be on the side of right and law? So, you can choose to control your talent. That's all." She tapped a finger on the form coaxingly.

Harry half-closed his eyes, and recalled one of the other forms he'd signed. "I'm also legally responsible to help the Ministry if they should need my Parseltongue abilities, aren't I?"

"Yes," said the witch, "but they meant they would question you about them, dear, not order you to use them—"

Harry snapped his eyes open and glared at her. "And what if I could have saved someone's life by speaking Parseltongue, and I don't do it because of the legal penalties, and then a person dies from a venomous snake's bite? Could I be charged with that person's death as a murder, since I had the power to prevent it and didn't do anything about it?"

The witch opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She began shuffling through the forms that Harry had already signed.

"I wouldn't put it past them to do that," said Harry. He sat on his rage with an effort, and kept his voice cool and cutting. "They could, if I signed that form. So, I won't." He stood up. "Thank you for helping me sign the other forms. And feel free to tell anyone you want about this."

“You can’t do this,” said the witch desperately. “Dear, the law’s very clear—all Parselmouths and possessors of other Dark talents have to register, and completely—“

“Can you stop me?” Harry asked her softly.

The witch picked up her wand. Harry met her eyes, and waited.

Abruptly, the witch went pale, and her hand shook as she laid her wand back down. “Don’t do that,” she whispered. “It’s awful, the way that you’re looking at me, as though you can peel back my skin and see every secret in my head.” She began to shake, and brought up her hands to cover her face.

Harry blinked. Perhaps he had looked more ferocious than he anticipated. He shook his head, once, and turned his back on her, catching Snape’s gaze. He nodded, and they made for the lifts.

“It should never have gone this far,” Snape hissed, as they waited for a lift to come. “To forbid you from speaking to snakes? It is madness.”

Harry closed his eyes, and entertained himself for a moment by imagining what Sylarana would have had to say if she was still there and he’d tried to remain silent around her. That thought helped him dispel some of the anger. He opened his eyes and said lightly, “Yes, and sudden, too. I think we’re going to stop by the second floor on the way out. I’d like to speak to Rufus Scrimgeour and found out how it got this bad this fast.”

Snape darted him a hard glance. “I thought we would return to Hogwarts,” he said. “It is dangerous to be outside the wards for too long, Harry.”

“I know,” said Harry, with a sigh. “But I think I need to know. He didn’t warn me. Either he knew and we need to renegotiate the terms of our alliance, or he didn’t know, and that means that things happened with suspicious speed. Why? Why did they suddenly think they needed to fear Parselmouths, of all people, or Dark wizards who weren’t registered before?” He shook his head.

“They have always feared those more powerful than themselves,” Snape whispered. “There are times when I can understand the Dark Lord’s thinking.”

Harry suppressed a shudder. The comment carried him back to Rosier’s laughter last night, and his claim that Harry could become a Dark Lord even if he killed Voldemort. And there had been times when Harry used Dark magic, or was in the midst of it, and certainly felt the temptation to go further. He thought of Walpurgis Night, and how he’d danced there. That was the kind of celebration the Ministry would like to control, and no doubt eliminate.

But against that was the set of words that Scrimgeour had once spoken, with all the passion of true conviction. It was not fair for the powerful to rule the world and wizards of ordinary power to have no recourse. By keeping the Ministry a neutral, open, bickering place that no Lord could control, he hoped to give people that chance.

Harry made a small sound in his throat and shook his head. Just another thorny path to dance down.

The lift came, then, and Harry stepped into it, followed closely by Snape. Harry concentrated. He would have to come up with the right words to convince Scrimgeour he wasn’t just another Lord come to meddle in the Ministry. Sometimes, power was a burden as much as it was freedom.

The Auror Office set Harry on edge. He could feel wards he couldn’t see quietly buzzing away in the background. He saw heads turning to follow him as Snape escorted him past individual Aurors’ desks, not necessarily because they could feel his magic, but because of the inherent suspicious nature their training seemed to give them. He could sense tension and unhappiness and grim, cold responsibility behind many of the faces around him, though that might have been caused at least partially by having to deal with paperwork.

They encountered an assistant outside Scrimgeour’s office, but for some reason, the instant he saw Harry, he widened his eyes and nodded to the door behind him. “Go right on in,” he said. “He’s been expecting you. He told me that I’d recognize you on sight, and I must

say, he was right.” He started grinning, a grin that didn’t falter even when Snape glared at him.

Harry shook his head in confusion and made his way into Scrimgeour’s office. How had Scrimgeour actually known that Harry would want to visit him? And why would he have been talking to other people about him?

The office was smaller than Harry would have thought it would be for the Head of the Auror Office, but that might have been an effect of the numberless photographs on the walls. Harry stared around, a bit dazedly. He caught glimpses of houses, people, trees, streets, a map of what seemed to be the Ministry, a few pictures of Hogwarts, scenes which seemed to be arrests, the soft, goofy visage of Minister Fudge, and too many others to really see.

“Harry. Come in.”

Harry turned around. In the center of all the photos was a desk—two desks, really, facing each other. Scrimgeour sat behind the first one, his yellow eyes calm and direct. Behind the other one, scratching frantically at a sheet of parchment that looked longer than he was tall, was Percy Weasley.

Harry stared at Scrimgeour. The Auror raised his impressive eyebrows and gestured once at Percy. “Ah yes, I forgot that you would already know Mr. Weasley. You were at the same school, after all, though not in the same House. This is more a re-acquaintance than a reintroduction, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harry muttered, even more confused. He had thought Percy was working in a department that checked on the thickness of cauldron bottoms, not for the Head Auror. Percy jerked his head up, gave Harry one single, eloquent, harassed glance, and then turned back to his sheet of parchment.

“Mr. Weasley’s helping me with a case I’m working on,” said Scrimgeour expansively. “Perfect for someone of his talents.” He gave Harry a slow wink.

Harry shook his head slightly, but felt a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He'd warned Scrimgeour about Percy entering the Ministry as a spy for Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix. He had thought the Auror would simply keep an eye on him, but it seemed as though Scrimgeour were more direct than that.

"You're here to see me about the new edict, I suppose?" Scrimgeour went on, effortlessly steering the conversation. "Yes. Pesky thing. They just dropped the forms on my desk this morning." He picked up the nearest sheaf of papers and rattled them. "Just how are we supposed to catch every Dark witch who does a minor love spell and doesn't want to register that she does them, I ask you?"

"I was hoping you could tell me why it was passed with such—efficiency," Harry said, deciding to take his cue from Scrimgeour. The Auror obviously didn't mind Percy overhearing them, so Harry wouldn't, either. "It really seems to have been hurried through the Wizengamot. And why does a Parselmouth need to register in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?" He made sure to inject a moderate amount of outrage into his voice. No one said that he couldn't be angry about that in front of the right people.

He saw that he'd startled Scrimgeour. The Auror sat up and leaned forward. "You registered there?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "I take it no one else is?"

Scrimgeour closed his eyes. "It would hardly matter if they were," he murmured. "Someone could always say it's just because there are no other Parselmouths in Britain."

"Or, at least, none fool enough to come in and register," said Snape tartly, unable to keep silent any longer.

"I didn't complete the registration," said Harry, deciding it was important to be honest. His alliance with Scrimgeour was based on an exchange of information, and before anything else, Scrimgeour was an Auror, bound to enforce wizarding law. If Harry didn't give him some room to maneuver between the lines, then he might have no

choice but to arrest Harry for breaking the law at some point. “I didn’t sign the form that said I understood I would be subjected to all appropriate penalties if I spoke to snakes.”

Scrimgeour’s eyes opened. Harry stared in fascination. He’d seen this transformation only once before, the first time he met Scrimgeour. The man tended to be detached and amused the rest of the time, but here, here was the intensity that had showed when he was telling Harry what he believed the Ministry was and could be.

“That,” said Scrimgeour, his voice clear and quiet, “was not part of any other registration.”

Harry clenched his fists. “So a Dark witch who makes love spells doesn’t have to stop making them?” he asked.

Scrimgeour shook his head. “How could we stop that, when love potions are legal to sell? No, she would agree to register that she made them and where she lived and so on, so that if a crime involving love spells happened, we would have a handy list of suspects—excuse me, people who would help us with our inquiries.” He fixed his eyes on Harry again. “But not this. I didn’t know that they would say you couldn’t use your talent at all.”

Harry stood quiet, thinking. If not for the date on Umbridge’s letter, he would have thought the registration was targeted at him because of his exploits at the Quidditch World Cup, but she’d written the letter before that happened.

That doesn’t mean the registration was not targeted at you, a quiet voice told him, not Regulus, from whom he hadn’t heard this morning, but the most Slytherin part of his brain. It still could be. At the very least, the idea that they don’t want you speaking Parseltongue, while they’re just keeping an eye on other Dark talents, suggests it.

But why? Parseltongue had been considered Dark ever since Slytherin’s day, from what Harry understood, because of what had ended up happening with him, but it was not such a powerful gift that the Ministry would act to prevent anyone from using it. It wasn’t as though Harry could command armies of snakes to attack anyone.

The voice had an answer for that, too. The Parseltongue is a convenient excuse. It's your power that they want to control. The rumors have had months to build, now, and how many people might have felt the burst of magic that alerted the Death Eaters to where Lux Aeterna was? They're getting nervous. If you can be seen as coming in publicly and cooperating with the Ministry, they can look as if they have you on a leash, rather than as if you're setting yourself up as an independent Lord.

Harry curled his lip in a silent snarl. He didn't think that powerful wizards should rule over those less strong, no, but he did object to the thought of the less powerful controlling him. He was a weapon and a sacrifice, but he chose who to defend and where to sacrifice himself. The Ministry hadn't even done him the courtesy of approaching openly. Already, Harry was regretting that he had come in and appeared to obey the law.

Yet what else could he have done? He was hardly prepared to take on the whole of the Ministry by himself.

He opened his eyes and met Scrimgeour's gaze again. "I may use it," he said, "if only to save people's lives."

"And I may arrest you," said Scrimgeour, as carefully, "if only to please people's eyes."

Harry nodded sharply, understanding. There were things Scrimgeour could not do and rules he would not break, but he might be able to ease the process of Harry's arrest or fine should it come to that. At least they both understood each other, now.

He looked once at Percy Weasley, but Scrimgeour did not volunteer any spontaneous explanation of what he was doing there, so Harry shrugged it away. "I'll see you later, Auror Scrimgeour," he said.

"And I will see you later, Mr. Potter," said Scrimgeour, equally formal. "Of that, I have no doubt at all."

Harry gave him a smile without humor and walked out of the office. As Snape had said, they really should get behind Hogwarts's wards.

His mind was spinning, though, reaching out, gathering up threads and seeing what connections he could braid out of them, which ones would benefit both him and his allies.

Snape followed quietly in Harry's wake. It appeared as though he wouldn't have to hex people after all, nor talk to his ward about the possible implications of a law that forbade only Parselmouths—effectively, only one wizard in Britain—to use their Dark talents.

Harry had figured that out for himself. Snape, thanks to the potion that he'd given Harry this morning, could feel his mind racing, picking and sorting through the implications, rejecting some and embracing others, though he could not read the substance of those thoughts.

Snape had brewed the potion last night, first in a series of stopgap solutions to Harry's self-sacrificial nature that he intended to make permanent. It had awakened Harry, yes, but it also gave Snape a passive link to him—one that would warn him when Harry was in danger, tell him where he was if Snape concentrated, and let him feel the general state of Harry's mind and emotions. It would not place any barriers on him. Harry could still go where he liked and do what he pleased, which he inevitably would anyway. But Snape could at least be at his right shoulder, should it become necessary.

Watching his ward stride ahead of him, Snape thought that it might not be as necessary as he believed.

He is opening his eyes. He sees much more of the world around him than he did when he first came to Hogwarts.

Now, if I can get him to see himself, too, we may be able to win true victories.

Snape smirked, and felt the stirring of long-hidden ambitions reviving in him again, hatching like dragons.

This is not about just victory over James or Gryffindor any more, if it ever was. This is about winning in general, and winning the future.

Chapter Seven: Who Speaks to the Many?

"I promise you, Harry, I had nothing to do with this."

Harry squinted at Albus, who hid his sigh and stifled his instinctive temptation to read the boy's mind. They had been in his office for the past ten minutes, and it seemed that no matter how much he denied having anything to do with Fudge's new edicts, Harry would not believe him. He kept trying new and subtler ways of questioning, as though he believed those would pull the truth from Albus at last.

While Albus waited for the next one, he studied what the summer had made of the boy. Harry had grown a bit taller. That was the most obvious and banal of the changes, however. His eyes were steadier, more direct, and he carried himself as though he might have some purpose in life outside of staying in the shadows. Albus had already concluded that his first plan to handle the boy would not work. He would have to try others.

At least Severus had agreed to let them meet alone. There was that. Harry had a fragile trust in Albus, while Severus had none at all, anymore.

And whose fault is that?

Albus winced. He'd grown used to living with that voice during the summer, but he did not like it. It asked him useless questions whose answers he already knew, and prompted him to think of regrets that he had long ago put aside. He had no time to think of them. Merlin knew his days were already full of the here-and-now consequences of his actions.

Harry seemed to have decided the direct approach was best after all. "But you're the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot," he said. "Fudge couldn't have passed this edict against Dark wizards without your help."

Albus sighed. "He could and he did, Harry," he said, and picked up the book that had been resting on a corner of his desk, with one of Fawkes's shed feathers serving as a bookmark. He handed it to

Harry and waited in silence as the boy read, while staring at the old perch on the other side of the room. He missed Fawkes. He wished the phoenix would visit him at least some of the time, but that seemed against whatever decision as to allegiance that Fawkes had made.

Harry looked back up, his face ashen. "He thinks we're at war?" he croaked.

Albus nodded. "Yes. 'The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot may be displaced or set aside in times of war, when the Minister must make a decision with the help of his loyal supporters,' and that's quoting from memory, Harry. I must admit, there are times when it's a sensible precaution. The law came into being during the War with Grindelwald, when the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot turned out to have been one of the Dark Lord's Lightning Guard." Albus grimaced. The trial of Beowulf Guile was not one that he liked to remember. "But this time, Fudge has been receiving reports of Dark activity that I think are exaggerated and multiplied beyond all count. He has not claimed that Voldemort has returned, not yet. That would require an official recognition of a Dark Lord, and thus an enemy, by the Ministry. But he may think another Dark Lord is on the rise, and that means that he can convince a good portion of the Wizengamot to obey him." Albus sighed. "He did not even attempt to show me the proof of this. He simply bypassed me. I think he knows he could not convince me."

Harry nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed. "That means that he could pass other laws," he said. "Doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Albus, and waited. The boy obviously had other questions to ask him.

Harry closed his eyes and sat very still for a moment. Albus felt the shimmer of magic climbing around him, intoxicating and pulling—or at least it would have been if he wasn't defended by his own, old, settled power. Harry's magic had not strengthened, but it seemed to have deepened, as though he were learning better control. Albus sincerely hoped so, for both the boy's sake and the sake of the wizarding world.

"They could hurt my allies," Harry whispered.

Albus's eyebrows rose. "Of course, the anti-werewolf edicts have already hurt Remus—" he began.

Harry opened his eyes and shook his head. "Not just those allies, sir. The allies that you promised you wouldn't interfere with, former Death Eaters and Dark wizards." He flexed one hand as though already anticipating it would hurt from the letters he had to write. "I have to warn them."

Albus checked his desire to say something. Harry was due for some bad experiences with the former Death Eaters and the Dark wizards, he suspected. He wished he could say something to ease Harry into the experience, but the boy would not believe him anyway. He had a tremendous capacity to forgive and forget.

Too tremendous, Albus thought. We trained him too well, Lily and I.

He started in the next instant, and banished the thoughts again. He simply had no time for regrets.

Harry nodded to him and stood. "Thank you, sir, for letting me know that magical Britain is essentially under martial law at the moment," he murmured, and then turned and strode from the room.

Albus sighed and turned to another of his tasks, not letting his mind linger for long on Harry. The boy was perhaps the most essential wizard in the world at the moment, outranking even his brother, whose training was, by all accounts, going well. But there were problems Albus had to settle that had nothing to do with him, and one that could, as yet, have nothing to do with him.

He picked up three letters, one from France, one from Bulgaria, and one from Godric's Hollow, and sat back to consider how best to respond to them.

Harry whispered the password to Snape's door—he'd had to ask his mentor to change it several times before they found one that did not refer to one of Harry's family members in an unflattering way—and opened it, just in time to find Snape receiving a Howler. The Potions Master sat behind his desk, marking essays and looking thoroughly

unimpressed, while the red envelope hovered above his desk and screamed at him.

“—AND I THOUGHT IT WAS MY MOTHER’S DECREE AT FIRST, AND NOW I FIND OUT THAT IT’S YOURS! DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I WANTED TO SEE HARRY AGAIN, BEFORE SCHOOL STARTED? AND HOW MUCH HE WANTED TO SEE ME? WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE TO TELL HIM THAT HE CAN’T HAVE VISITORS? HE SAVED EVERYBODY FROM A DEATH EATER! ISN’T THAT ENOUGH TO WIN YOUR APPROVAL?”

Harry covered his face with one hand. He supposed he’d been foolish to think that a week of calm letters from Draco meant that there would be no more explosive response sooner or later.

The Howler fell to Snape’s desk. Snape finished writing the line he’d started, then drew out his wand, murmured, “Incendio,” and burned the envelope to a crisp before he looked up.

“Harry,” he said evenly. “I trust that your meeting with Albus went well.”

Harry rolled his eyes. He’d insisted on going alone to speak to Dumbledore, and it still had taken him almost a week to get that agreement out of Snape. Now he had to stand there while Snape used gentle Legilimency on him to find out if the Headmaster had left another web in his mind. His mentor sat back at last, with a nod, and said, “Your mind is clear. Now. I must ask again if you are sure about this expedition.”

Harry folded his arms. “Unless you want me to not have the books and cauldrons and robes I need for the new term, then yes.”

“I could firecall an associate of mine who often shops in Diagon Alley, and have her retrieve your new belongings for you,” said Snape, an offer he’d made before.

Harry shook his head. His summer at Lux Aeterna had at least addicted him to one thing, he thought: the feel of open space in front of him and the sky above his head. It hadn’t been bad during the first

few weeks of August, since he could go outside as long as he didn't go too far from the castle, but for the last week, Snape had kept him behind the wards. Students arrived tomorrow, and he wouldn't have much excuse to leave again unless he went flying or to Hogsmeade, and Harry wasn't sure that Snape would allow that, either. "I want to go to Diagon Alley myself."

Snape sighed. "Very well." He stood, cast a Summoning Charm on his cloak, and gave Harry a critical glance. "We will get there soon enough," he said. "It is not yet noon. You need not be so impatient."

Harry blinked. He had his arms folded, but he wasn't tapping a foot or sighing or looking at the clock. He hadn't thought that he looked so impatient. "What?"

Snape narrowed his eyes as though surprised by something, and gestured. "Precede me to the Floo, please, Mr. Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes. His last name usually meant he'd done something wrong, but in this case, he had no idea what that could be. He paused to grab his own cloak from his bedroom. With any luck, if anyone recognized him from Skeeter's newspaper articles, he could use the hood to shield his face.

Harry threw his head back and breathed out comfortably. They had arrived via Floo at the Leaky Cauldron, and from there, Snape had guided him back into Diagon Alley. The sight around him was exactly what Harry had wanted. Fresh air, blue sky—he supposed the day Snape had taken him to London hadn't been the last sunny day of August, after all—people moving around him who weren't cheering hysterically or running in fear. He could feel an agitation he'd barely been aware was there dying in his stomach.

"Come, Harry. James said he had set up a separate account for you at Gringotts, I take it?"

Harry nodded. Snape would say nothing about the rest of the contents of that letter if he would say nothing, he supposed. The rest of the letter from James had warned Snape against trying to touch the money in Harry's account. Harry winced at the very memory. Sometimes his father reminded him of nothing so much as a more

immature Draco making comments on how little money the Weasleys had.

“This way,” said Snape, and guided Harry down the Alley.

They received a few stares as they walked, but not many. Harry relaxed by degrees. Probably people were staring absently, in the fashion of someone who knew they were supposed to recognize someone else, but couldn't quite do it. Of course, Skeeter's last article about him had been four days ago, and he had his magic even more tightly shielded than normal.

They're staring anyway, Regulus said, his voice abruptly appearing in Harry's head. They must sense something about you, but I think most of them can't tell what it is. That doesn't mean you won't trouble their dreams, later.

How comforting. Harry snorted. Where have you been?

Teaching you a lesson, said Regulus. You seem to have settled back down, thank Merlin. Are you sorry for what you did?

Harry sighed as they passed Flourish and Blotts. The unnecessary part, yes. But I can't be sorry for dissipating the curse, or facing Rosier and keeping him occupied when he could have hurt someone else.

Regulus snorted back at him. Have you given thought to how you might help me get my body back?

Harry threw up his hands, causing Snape to glance at him. Harry resolved to keep his gestures under control from now on. I've tried! But when all you can tell me is “small space” and “darkness,” that doesn't help much. I told you what I think the best chance would be.

And I told you why it wouldn't work. Regulus sounded sulky. I don't have perfect control of the wards, not when I can't see them. I was able to shut Bellatrix out of the Black estates she'd been hiding in, but I can't open the wards for one person and not another. I just don't

have that fine a control. If I opened them to Narcissa so that she could come in and search about, Bellatrix could get in, too.

Harry shook his head. You'll have to take a risk, sooner or later, if you want to be back in your body. He thought Regulus was probably imprisoned somewhere in one of the Black estates. It would explain why none of the Death Eaters had ever found the body, and why the wards had slammed shut immediately when Sirius died and the heirship transferred to Regulus; they were protecting their new master. Harry also thought it was the sort of thing that would appeal to Voldemort, since the locket that had contained a part of his soul had also reposed somewhere among the Black treasures.

Although...come to think of it, he can't have known about that, or he would have taken his locket back.

Listen, Regulus interrupted his musings. I don't want to be found by Bellatrix. That would be horrible.

I agree, it would be, Harry said. But if you are in a Black house, and you don't let the wards relax for someone who's friendly to you, then you'll never be found at all.

Regulus sighed at him. I would find it reassuring if you were on hand when the wards fell, so that you could come in immediately and search.

Harry raised his eyebrows. You saw what happened the last time you tried to convince Snape that I should be able to leave Hogwarts and search for you. Snape had driven Regulus from his mind with a judicious combination of Occlumency and a defense spell that he still hadn't taught Harry, but which had left Regulus whimpering in pain for hours afterward.

Regulus sighed again. I know.

Harry shook his head once more, and then they were at Gringotts. Harry had been there, but not for over a year, and he had forgotten how imposing it was. The white marble glittered and flashed in the sun, sometimes too bright to look at. The bronze doors weren't much

better, and the uniform of the goblin who stood in front of those outer doors seemed to have been made by a former Gryffindor who wanted to outdo the garish combination of red and gold in the House's common room.

Harry met the goblin's eyes as they walked up the steps and towards the doors. This was a southern goblin, and so different from the northern ones. For one thing, his skin was darker, his eyes, as they fixed on Harry, were dark and slanted, and he appeared to have no claws and only five fingers on each hand when Harry was close.

It wasn't until they reached the actual front doors that Harry realized the goblin was studying him back, his eyes gone into even smaller slits as they narrowed. He didn't say anything, however, and so Harry simply nodded to him and passed into the antechamber beyond, where he and Snape would have to go through a pair of silver doors engraved with the goblins' curse on thieves.

Harry's skin began to tingle the moment he stepped into the antechamber. He blinked and looked behind the world again, wondering if he would see a web here. He was somewhat puzzled when he did not.

Then he glanced from side to side, and saw glittering white strands running on either side of him. He couldn't see the web because he stood in the middle of it. He sighed. Of course this one would be especially strict, since after all these goblins are guarding the money of the wizarding world.

"Come, Harry," said Snape again, and steered him forward. Harry kept his eyes open and his sight focused on the web, though, which made for a mixed sight of afterimages, goblins, and wizards in the room beyond. Now and then he stumbled, but Snape's firm hand on his shoulder held him steady.

They approached a bored-looking goblin behind the counter, who sat up slightly on seeing them. "Welcome to Gringotts," he said, with such practiced polish that Harry wondered how anyone ever heard sincerity in it. "My name is Flashkack. Your name and business?"

“Harry Potter,” said Harry as calmly as he could. The web was growing brighter around him, or at least the strand of white light immediately in front of him was. He didn’t understand why, and had to strive to hold his voice under control. “I’ve come about an account that my father, James Potter, established for me from his vault.”

Flashkack didn’t say anything for a long moment, simply and steadily staring at him. Harry blinked, his eyes watering with tears from the web. He’d never seen any other behave like this, and wondered what was going on.

Of course, I still have a lot to learn about being vates, he reminded himself.

“Of course,” the goblin murmured at last, and abruptly the brilliant strand of the web calmed down to what it had been. “Here is your key, sir.” He passed the key to the vault over with one hand. Harry took it, and felt a faint stir of magic where their fingers touched. Flashkack once more stared intently at him, then said, “I will take you to your vault myself, sir.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you. We would be grateful.” He heard Snape’s slight snarl behind him, and suspected the man was not thrilled at the thought of riding one of the carts down to the vault. Harry ignored him. Flashkack’s eyes wouldn’t have let him go at the moment, either.

“May I invite you,” Flashkack said suddenly, his voice rough and low, “to attend a certain meeting in one of the back rooms when you are done with the vault?”

Harry felt his heart pound once, as though in answer to the unusual voice. “I accept,” he said, without thinking about the consequences.

“Harry,” said Snape, his voice a pace or two away from a growl.

Harry cast him an impatient glance. “My guardian can come with me, I take it?” he asked Flashkack.

“As long as he promises not to behave like a wizard, of course,” said Flashkack.

Harry winced slightly. From the context, “like a wizard” obviously meant “rudely and arrogantly.” “I’ll stand surety for him myself if he does, in the name of blood and stone,” he said. He was lost when it came to northern goblin courtesies, but he knew the southern ones fairly well.

Flashkack cocked his head, and something like a smile touched his solemn face. “I accept, in the name of silver and bronze.” He gestured towards one of the guarded doors on the far side of the room. “This way, sir. Your vault awaits.”

Harry glanced once around the room, taking in the large number of goblins standing around the walls, and then fixed his gaze solely on the table in front of him. It had two chairs. Harry and Snape would sit there, while the goblins remained on their feet around them.

Harry calmed his breathing, his desire to lash out, and his instinctive certainty that they were being made to sit like this so that their heads were lower than the goblins’. It didn’t matter. He wasn’t coming to this meeting as some kind of conqueror, anyway, but as a potential vates interested in hearing what the goblins had to say.

He heard Snape drawing in breath for some kind of vitriolic comment, and reached up, squeezing his mentor’s arm. He made sure it was the left arm, and that his hand covered the Dark Mark. Snape let out his breath without speaking. Harry nodded to Flashkack, who had served as their escort, and took his seat.

He realized abruptly that the white web, though still present and shining around them when he looked, was dimmer here than elsewhere. Before he could think better of it, he murmured aloud, “It isn’t as bright.”

One of the goblins near the wall gave a harsh sound that might have been a laugh, and took a step forward. Harry saw how the heads all around the room swung to him, orienting on him—no, Harry decided as the goblin came a step or two forward, her. There was something about the shape of her face and the way she carried herself that was different from Flashkack, whom Harry was certain was male.

“No,” she said. “And do you know why, vates?”

Harry shook his head. He was afraid for Snape beside him, strung tight as a crossbow. He once again tried to reach out and soothe him through touch, but this time he didn’t know if he succeeded. “Please, tell me why.”

“Because no money is exchanged here,” said the goblin, standing with one foot set in front of the other as she stared at him. “No keys to vaults are given.” She smiled, her grin a nightmare of jagged teeth. “The web is tied to the business of the bank itself, and reinforced each time wizards take or add to the wealth they have stolen from us.”

Harry shuddered. The words again spilled from his lips before he could stop them. “Who did that?”

“Ah,” said the goblin, a bare breath. Her eyes hadn’t blinked, Harry realized suddenly, and she had never looked away from him, either. It was like being caught on a stone drill. “Most of the magical creatures have no answer for that. But in our case, we do. We did work as equal partners with wizards until we refused to give a certain one a certain treasure he wanted. He took it anyway, and spun the web to make it so that each exchange thereafter would strengthen the bonds upon us. His name was Salazar Slytherin.”

Harry felt Snape jerk. “He never did anything of the kind,” the Head of Slytherin snapped. “He was a Dark wizard, there is no denying that, but he had no need to steal treasure from goblins or weave webs. You are lying.”

The reaction was instantaneous. Several goblins around the walls lifted their hands, and Harry saw that they held bows like the northern goblins had, save that their arrows did not shine white, but silver. Harry felt the hum coming from those arrows. He didn’t recognize the magic, but he doubted it would be good for Snape if the bolts hit him anywhere on his body.

The female goblin turned her head, by slow degrees, to look at Snape. She seemed amused more than anything, Harry thought, at least if he

was reading the wrinkles that ran around her dark eyes correctly. "You would call the hanarz of the goblins of Gringotts a liar, to her face?" she asked.

Harry winced. Remembering how much the northern goblins had valued honesty, he had some guess as to the depth of the insult Snape had just given the hanarz. "Please, forgive him," he said, making sure not to start to his feet or get in between Snape and the arrows, though he wanted to. "He is completely unfamiliar with all this, and he is the Head of the House that Salazar Slytherin established at Hogwarts. He thinks he is speaking the truth."

"Speaking the truth does not always involve calling others liars, Harry Potter," the hanarz murmured. "Would you not agree?"

Harry nodded unwillingly.

"And you have some idea of how much honesty means to us?"

Harry had to nod again.

"Then tell me," said the hanarz, tone distant and detached, as though confronting an intellectual problem, "why should he not die?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. Well, they value honesty. "If you kill him," he said, "then I will not help you, and will more than likely kill many of you in turn, in my explosion of rage. I love him, and even though he's an idiot sometimes, I won't suffer you to touch him."

The hanarz considered him in silence. Then she nodded once, and the bows along the walls lowered. Harry sat back, and became aware of Snape's harsh breathing next to him. He didn't turn and ask his mentor how he was. It was obvious how he was—angry and terrified almost witless. Harry hoped the meeting wouldn't last long past this moment. Snape always started saying unfortunate things when he was this upset.

"Well spoken," said the hanarz. "Now, tell me what you plan to do about our web, little vates."

Harry considered her. "I would have to close the bank to dissipate the web, wouldn't I?"

"Stop the exchange of money, more than likely," the goblin said, not sounding at all bothered.

Harry nodded. "And that, of course, would destroy one of the pillars of wizarding society," he said.

The hanarz said nothing, simply watched him expectantly. Harry stared into her eyes and found he could ignore the eyes of the watching goblins. They followed and obeyed her so deeply that hers was the only stare that mattered.

He took a deep breath. "I can't destroy it right now, any more than I can destroy the linchpins that hold your northern cousins captive," he began.

"But?" the hanarz prompted, instead of getting angry as Harry had expected, a faint smile touching her lips. Harry revised his opinion of her cleverness upwards. Perhaps she had never intended to kill Snape, after all, or had at least been smart enough to know what would happen if she did.

"I can promise to try," said Harry softly.

The hanarz nodded once. "You swear it by blood and stone, by silver and bronze?"

"More," said Harry. This is where my education comes in handy. "I swear it by gold."

The murmur of voices around him began again, and the hanarz stepped back to rest against the wall. Flashkack came forward to escort them out of the room. Harry stood up gratefully, stretching tense muscles and praying that Snape would keep quiet until they were safely out. Luckily, he did.

Of course, his first words once they were navigating their tunnel back towards the cart that had brought them here were, "I suppose that

promise was worth so little that they immediately had to let us go, without even a farewell?"

"Wrong, wizard," said Flashkack, turning around to meet Snape's eyes. "That promise is worth so much that we need ask nothing else of Mr. Potter. He will keep his oath."

Harry kept his eyes fixed on the tunnel ahead, and tried not to hear Snape's mumbling or feel the goblin's speculative glance. He was winding himself up in more and more complications, but he'd always suspected that would happen. Life wasn't simple, nor easy.

Harry glanced around uneasily. It wasn't that he didn't know about Dark magic, he told himself. He'd practiced it, for Merlin's sake.

But there was something about Knockturn Alley that made him nervous anyway. Perhaps it was the air of sordid, petty transactions that took place here, Harry thought, shying away from a witch who stepped out of a shop so heavily curtained that Harry could make out nothing of what it sold. He knew some Dark magic, yes, and the deep, wild darkness that had come and danced with him on Walpurgis Night. He knew little of the darkness that poverty and desperation could drive one to.

The witch shuffled past him, gave a dry, rattling cough, and fumbled open the handkerchief she held, scooping up a handful of gray powder to rub on her face. A look of ecstasy overcame her features. Harry had to look away.

"This way."

Snape swept out of the apothecary shop, to Harry's relief, and led him towards the entrance to Knockturn Alley. He'd insisted on Harry staying within his sight, his cloak pulled up, but hadn't let him enter the shop. Now, from the way he strode, he was obviously determined to leave.

Harry hadn't gone far, though, when the force that evidently delighted in making his life hard decided to do it again.

Two men had been carrying a crate from one shop to another, their hands obviously trembling under its weight. They were passing directly in front of Harry and Snape when they dropped the crate, and it cracked open, wood splinters flying in several directions. Harry ducked them.

Almost at once, there was a horrible hissing.

The men screamed. Harry lowered his hand from his face to see snakes swarming over them, small, lithe green-and-gold bodies moving with astonishing quickness, concentrating in one place and biting again and gain. One of the wizards convulsed and went down. The other managed to keep his feet, but from the glazed look in his eyes, it wouldn't be long before he succumbed to the venom.

Acting on instinct, Harry took a step forward. "Stop!" he called out, and from the jerk Snape gave beside him, knew it had been in Parseltongue.

And the snakes all stopped, as one, their bodies reacting like the body of the artificial snake from the Black treasures who had attacked Draco last year. Then their heads swung to face him, also all as one, and a hissing eddied among them, forming into words that seemed to emerge at last from one serpent in the center of the pile.

"Who speaks to the Quiver? Who speaks to the Many?"

Harry swallowed. He was aware that he had a small crowd, people leaning out of shops to watch, but he couldn't concentrate on that in the face of the information he'd just received. The Many were hive cobras, a type of magical snake from South Africa. They were extremely difficult to kill, since they were essentially one mind in many bodies, and killing one small body would just result in the mind passing to another host. They could bite and inject venom into a victim that would kill as it was reinforced again and again from multiple mouths, or spit their poison into their victim's eyes. One book Harry had read even suggested they could possess wizards, if they really tried. Out of control, they would be more than a menace.

He had an opportunity to stop that from happening, and it was more than enough. "I do," he said, taking a step forward just so that he wouldn't accidentally see any wizards from the corner of his eye and speak in English. "I am a Parselmouth, and I ask that you please stop attacking those wizards."

"One is dead, Parselmouth," said the eddying hiss. "And they seized us from our warm den and brought us here, cutting the Many in half. They intended to cut us and mash us and use our eggs. Why should we spare them?"

Harry swallowed. "I suppose you don't have any reason to," he said. "But I ask you to."

"And the other people, too?" There was a mocking tone to the voices now. "Shall the Many refrain from attacking other people, because you ask us to?"

"Eventually, you have to know that they'll kill you," said Harry. "You can't make your way back home from here; it's too far away. Hunters will come, and they'll kill you. I can spare the Many's life."

There was a long silence, and then all the snakes left the dead wizards and made for him as one. They moved incredibly fast, and smoothly dodged the hex that Snape fired at them.

Harry forced himself to stand still as the snakes swarmed up his body, wrapping around his arms and his chest and his legs. One draped around his neck, and held its body in front of his face, swaying. Harry could see the hood expanding around its neck, and the marking on it, turned to delicate green and gold by the light behind it—the infinity symbol, eternity or death. The cobra's eyes were gold. It could spit into his eyes, and he would be permanently blinded. There was no cure for that kind of blindness that anyone knew of, magical or Muggle, though the Many's ordinary bites could be cured.

Harry held the cobra's eyes and waited.

The hiss once more built into a single voice. "What would you give the Quiver, Parselmouth?"

"There is a sanctuary," said Harry carefully. "A forest in the place where I live, where many magical creatures live and run free of interference from wizards. I will take you there, and set you free. It is not the Many's natural home, but it may begin a new one."

There was a long silence, unless one counted the sound of scales scraping on and over him. Harry breathed shallowly. He was sure that Snape was staring at him in horror, but he couldn't look up and see if that was true. He could see only the cobra right in front of his face, swaying back and forth, back and forth.

It occurred to him that it might be the last thing he ever saw.

"And if hunters come after the Many even there?" they hissed then. "They may. They came after us in our warm den very far from wizards. Will you defend us?"

Harry set himself. He was a Parselmouth, the only kind of wizard who could speak to these creatures, and he had a duty that no other kind of wizard in this situation could have. "I will."

The Many slithered back and forth over him. Harry realized then that they were actually moving in a pattern, the snakes at the upper right side of his chest sliding slowly down to the left and then twining around his legs, while other snakes crawled over his back and shoulders and upwards. Only the one in front of his face did not alter its position.

"We accept."

Harry let out a short breath, then turned his head, carefully, to look at Snape. His mentor's face was furious again, but that was no surprise.

"I'm going to Apparate now," said Harry quietly. "I don't think it would be a good idea to go by Portkey or Floo. I swear that I'm only going to Hogsmeade, and nowhere else."

Snape snapped his head down. "I will be behind you," he said.

Harry nodded, gathered his strength around him, and Apparated. Harry watched as the Many flowed away from him into the Forbidden Forest, a tide of green and gold, and sighed. He straightened, shaking his hands, and then turned to face Snape, who had followed him every step of the way from Hogsmeade.

"I couldn't think of anything else to do," he said.

Snape simply watched him, face blank. Harry had no way of telling what he was thinking. He opened his mouth to defend himself again, and was interrupted by a deep, confident voice that skimmed out from behind him.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry turned swiftly. Two tall wizards in gray cloaks were walking towards him from the direction of Hogsmeade. One of them held a scroll in front of him, from which he read as they halted a few feet from Harry.

"Mr. Harry Potter, you have today committed two crimes," he said. "One is use of your Parseltongue skills, a forbidden Dark talent under Ministry Edict 6.8.0. The other is failure to complete your registration as a Parselmouth, and therefore desire to hide your Dark magic from others." He lowered the scroll, and he and the other wizard both drew their wands. Harry couldn't see their faces under their low cloak hoods, but he knew from the wizard's voice that he was smiling. "You will come with us now. We will escort you to Minister Fudge."

Harry stiffened his shoulders. "And you are?" he asked.

"Oh, we have an official title," said the wizard who hadn't spoken so far yet, "but I can never remember it. Call us the Hounds. We sniff after Dark magic."

Harry sighed. One glance at Snape showed him an inch from exploding. Harry shook his head. "My guardian can come with me?" he asked, as he started divesting himself of the shrunken packages he'd got in Diagon Alley. There was no reason to take them with him.

“Ah,” said the wizard who’d read the scroll. “Of course.” He stepped forward and gripped Harry’s shoulder. “I’m afraid not.”

And then he went into Side Along Apparition, dragging Harry with him, cutting off Snape’s angry roar as they went.

Chapter Eight: The Hounds

Harry came out of the Apparition with his stomach jolting, but with Regulus whispering in his head, You're somewhere in the Ministry. One of the interrogation rooms. I recognize them from one time I was brought here.

There's all sorts of interesting things that you haven't told me about yourself, aren't there? Harry concentrated on the words to keep himself from panicking. He blinked, and blinked again, and looked around the room when it became obvious that the gray-cloaked wizards had simply released his arms and made no further attempt to confine him.

It was utterly blank, the walls made of gray stone, blocks without a visible join or seam between them. There were no photographs, portraits, or other decorations on them, and the only furniture was a chair behind him, which one of his captors promptly pushed him into. Harry felt his hands clench in anticipation of something, and it took him a moment to realize that it was a beating or a surprise attack. The walls and the chair were not natural.

And the wizards were not treating him like one normally would a feared prisoner. Harry glared at them.

One of them—Harry thought it was the one who had read the scroll out to him—chuckled. “Ooh, look, Grim, the kitten has claws!”

Grim, who was apparently the other wizard, laughed more loudly. He swept his hood back and revealed himself as a confident, handsome, young-looking man with blond hair and green eyes. Harry wouldn't have given him a glance if they passed in Diagon Alley. “I'd say he does,” he responded. “Or, at least, fangs. You saw what he did in Knockturn, Crup.”

Crup made a sound of disgust beneath his breath and moved his hood back. He himself was brown-haired, but his brown eyes and his face were utterly ordinary. “Yeah, you're right.”

"You were watching me in Knockturn Alley?" Harry asked. He filed away a few questions to ask for later, such as why they called themselves by the names of dogs. One of them had said something about being Hounds right before Apparating with Harry, but he didn't know what that might mean.

"Of course," said Crup. "Someone had to. You were a Parselmouth who refused to complete his registration, and then you went to the Auror Office and acted as though you knew the Head Auror. You're interesting. When you went down Knockturn Alley, you only made yourself more interesting." He gave a smile, and Harry saw his eyes go cold. His ordinary face could lie, then. Of course, the way he moved had already told Harry that; he seemed to have had war wizard training. "And then you spoke to snakes. Careless, Mr. Potter, very careless. If you wanted your Dark talent to remain secret, you shouldn't have used it in public."

Harry fought the temptation to bare his teeth. His best choice in these circumstances was still to remain silent and as polite as possible. He didn't understand why they were so confident, since they seemed aware of his power, but that only made him more cautious in return. Perhaps they had some advantage that would offset his magic.

"The last I knew, saving someone's life was considered laudatory," he said. "I convinced the Many to come with me to the Forbidden Forest, instead of attacking other people in Knockturn Alley."

Crup laughed at him, throwing his head back and closing his eyes. His laughter did rather resemble a bark, reminding Harry of Sirius's. "How would we know that, Mr. Potter? I saw two wizards fall dead of the Many's bites, and then the snakes migrated to you. Then you fled from the alley like a criminal. Perhaps you commanded the snakes to stop attacking, but how would I know that? I don't speak Parseltongue."

"Shouldn't it have been obvious?" Harry asked.

"No," said Grim, his face gone dark. "You were caught using your foul creatures, and you might as well admit it, Dark wizard scum."

Crup reached out and put a hand on his partner's arm. "Grim," he chided. "The boy isn't even aware of why we, and not Aurors, brought him here yet. I think we should explain that first." He faced Harry. "You heard the name Hounds. Do you have any idea what it means?"

Harry shook his head.

I don't understand, Regulus whispered. I can almost see into his mind, which should mean that he has a connection with the Dark Lord, but I'm being blocked. There's a wall of some kind. Do you think he's a Legilimens?

I don't know, Harry thought back.

"We are the ones who track down and sniff out evil," said Crup, throwing his head back proudly. "We should know what darkness means. Some of us were former Aurors who got too close to our enemies. Others actually served as spies or messengers for the last Dark Lord. Some of us were simply naturally talented in the Dark Arts, but chose to serve the Ministry rather than act against the good of the wizarding world. We're a good group, as good as you'll find, but we follow the scent of evil. And that means we're the perfect ones to enforce the Minister's new edicts. The Aurors are often tiresome, with their paperwork and their legalities. What you need in a war is someone who can act quickly."

"I've never heard of you," said Harry, driving himself back to calmness again. "And I should have. I have studied history, and I would have noticed if there were Hounds running around and arresting criminals."

Crup snorted. "That's because we're new, little kitten. The Minister needed us, and so he created us, drawing us from other departments." He smiled at Harry. "You're actually only the second person we've arrested. Don't you feel special?"

"He didn't announce your creation, either," Harry persisted, trying to ignore the sick feeling in his stomach. "And he should have. There are laws saying that a new force like this should get news and press coverage."

Grim sighed and pressed his hand over his heart. "Alas, we had to sacrifice that for the sake of doing our duty. The Minister decided we would be more effective if no one knew of us or our ultimate mission for a while."

Harry tried to swallow. It was difficult with a dry throat. These are Fudge's secret police, essentially. "And what is your ultimate mission?" he asked, working a note into his voice as if impressed, playing along.

"To get rid of all Dark magic in Britain."

They answered together, and their voices were passionate and their eyes clear. Harry had no doubt this was something that mattered to them, beyond all the joking around that they had done. He shook his head, slowly, feeling a surge of pity for them.

"What's the matter?" challenged Crup. "Don't think we can do it, kitten?"

"No," said Harry. "There are Dark artifacts hidden in manors all over Britain, and plenty of Dark wizards who hide their talents. How in the world are you going to find everyone who might do a spell you don't approve of?" He was thinking of Connor, whose compulsion gift wasn't common knowledge and could not be eradicated from his mind without breaking his mind. Would they make him sign a form saying that he would never use it again? Or would they take the chance of breaking him in order to make him something more "Light?"

"We'll settle for getting rid of public practitioners first," said Grim. "Like you."

Harry shrugged. "I don't plan to stop using Parseltongue, particularly when I can use it to save lives."

Crup surged to his feet. "That was all we were waiting for," he said, and grabbed Harry's shoulder, and dragged him forward.

Harry tensed, wanting to lash out, but then reminded himself that the Hounds were still within the boundaries of law as they knew them. He couldn't strike and hurt someone who was only fulfilling his duty. He let Crup drag him into the next room.

Harry, said Regulus abruptly. Are they wearing something around their necks?

Harry managed to turn his head and squint up at Crup's throat. Yes, he sent back. A collar, it looks like, though I can't see the whole thing, and made of silver. The quick glance he sent Grim confirmed that he wore what looked the same thing. I wonder if their resemblance to dogs really goes so far that they have to be chained to the wall at night?

Yes, I can see them now, said Regulus. That's what's keeping me out of their minds. How strange. I don't know why they would want to block access to me, how they would even know about something like me.

Harry was about to respond, but then he saw the face of the man sitting behind a desk across from him, and swallowed.

It was Minister Fudge; Harry knew that from every picture he'd seen in the Daily Prophet. The Minister normally looked plump and self-confident. Now, though, he wore the expression of a man haunted day and night by some heavy burden, and he stood up when he saw Harry and began toying with his hands. His eyes examined Harry intently, seeming to linger especially hard on the lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, that's him."

Crup nodded. "Yes, sir. And he just said that he intended to keep using Parseltongue. If we let him free, he'll go right back to practicing Dark magic." He deposited Harry in a chair in front of the desk, which was large and made of polished mahogany. Harry tried to look around the room, but other than knowing it was larger than the interrogation room and colored red, he couldn't see much. Crup kept

hovering over him “I’ll give my word that I saw him practice it, sir, and of course Grim will back me up.”

“Of course,” said Grim. He took a position on the other side of the desk. Harry didn’t think it was a coincidence that the stance blocked Harry from having an easy path to the Minister.

At least, it would block me from having an easy physical path to him. Harry let his lip curl in contempt. Who do they think I am? My magic could still reach him and blast the life out of him before they could move.

He felt the temptation, once again, to simply do something like that, lash out and pin Fudge to the wall with his magic, as he’d once pinned Dumbledore and his brother. But Harry told himself he had to exercise control over his temper. He couldn’t simply go around attacking everyone he didn’t like. That wasn’t what a grown wizard did, and it was obvious he would have to be the adult here, since no one else was about to volunteer.

“Then,” said Fudge, bobbing his head, “the law is very clear.” He turned to Harry. “Mr. Potter, you understand why you’ve been brought here?”

Harry met his eyes and gave thanks for the deep, calm mask Lily had made him practice until it was natural. He could summon it back now, even though he’d spent so much time with Snape, who encouraged him to be more open, because he’d spent years on years living under it. “No, Minister,” he said. “I am sorry that my use of Parseltongue offended Mr. Grim and Mr. Crup, but I acted as I did to keep the Many from biting wizards in Knockturn and Diagon Alleys. I would argue that I broke the law in ignorance, not in malicious use of Dark magic.”

“Ignorance of the law is no excuse,” Fudge retorted, his eyes gleaming with triumph. “And it’s a convenient coincidence, isn’t it, that lately Dark potions have appeared on the market that use the eggs and scales of the Many in them? I suppose you’ll argue that you just happened to be able to gain control over the snakes, and that they just happened to appear in Knockturn Alley on a day you were there?”

“Any Parselmouth could have commanded the snakes, sir,” said Harry. Regulus’s muttering in the back of his head, about disrespect and what idiots they all were, wasn’t helping, so he decided to ignore it. “And I did not know about the Dark potions. I’m sorry that they have been a trouble and a plague on your administration.” He decided that a little judicious flattery could not hurt. “I know that you’ve been doing your very best for all of us in wizarding Britain. You’ve done a remarkable job.” Especially considering that you’re soft enough that I would have expected you to crumple your first year in office. “I would hate to act against that or undermine it in any way.” He bowed his head slightly, as though contrite.

It worked, at least partially. He saw Fudge puff up and ran a proud hand down his chest. “Yes, well, I do my best,” he said, and coughed. Then his face darkened again. “And that means passing stricter laws against Dark wizards like yourself. Or would you argue with that?”

“Not at all, sir,” said Harry. His thoughts were spiky, his mind crystal clear. He didn’t think he could say or do much to soothe Fudge’s fears, but he hoped he could at least keep them from damaging him as much as they might. “Dark magic as the magic of compulsion could threaten the free wills of others, and I am against that.”

He was disconcerted when Fudge laughed. “Of course you are,” he said. “Since when have Dark Lords cared about the wills of others?”

Harry stared at him. “You think I’m a Dark Lord, sir?”

“Of course you are.” Fudge waved his hand. “Not as bad as—as You-Know-Who, of course, but you’re still rising. And we need to do all that we can to prevent that rise.” He launched into what Harry thought was probably a practiced speech. “We all did very poorly in the First War, of course, but that was because we weren’t prepared. This time, we know the signs to watch for.” He nodded to Grim, and the man scurried off to the other side of the room to fetch something made of paper, by the sounds of it. “This time, we won’t be caught with our trousers around our ankles!” He raised one hand and pointed a finger at Harry. “Even Dark Lords are subject to the rule of wizarding law, Mr. Potter!”

Harry hid his contempt as much as possible. He knew from the book that Hawthorn Parkinson had given him last year, on bindings, that that wasn't true. Dark Lords and Light Lords usually ignored the bounds of law because they could afford to do so, though Light Lords sometimes made a pretense, like Dumbledore, of obeying the rules. But magical power had always been the ultimate trump card in those discussions. If Voldemort was standing here, of course he would not hesitate to use magic to fling the morons into walls.

But I am not a Dark Lord, Harry reminded himself. I am not any kind of Lord. That is why I am different from them. I'm not about to hurt innocent people who really think they are protecting the wizarding world.

He kept his voice calm, his face friendly and open. "What would it take to convince you that I'm not a Dark Lord, Minister?"

"You had a chance to do that already," Fudge retorted regally, as Grim came up beside him, staggering under the weight of the large piece of paper. "We offered you a chance to register yourself like any other Dark wizard. You refused to do so."

"I am sorry, sir," said Harry, slightly narrowing his eyes. "I was told that my case was unique. No other Dark wizard was asked to actually stop using Dark magic. Instead, I was the only one."

Fudge shook his head. "That is because you are a Dark Lord."

Harry wondered if the Minister would know what circular logic was if it danced naked in front of him. "Sir—"

Grim managed to shake out the immense piece of parchment with a shout. Harry peered. It was a chart, he could make out that much, and carefully labeled with boxes in different colors, but he couldn't tell what the words said; they were all inked carefully into place with miniscule letters.

"You see," said Fudge, gesturing to the parchment, "we know that you are a Dark Lord. No matter what you may claim, we know that

you have Dark talents, and will follow in the path of Grindelwald and—and You-Know-Who. We have a chart that compares you to them.” He looked at Harry triumphantly.

Harry wondered when the government of wizarding Britain had become so desperately pathetic. He kept his voice as calm as possible when he said, “Sir, I can’t read the chart.”

“You should be able to,” Crup whispered into his ear. “What kind of Dark Lord has problems with his eyes?”

Harry glared at him, and then turned back in time to see Fudge jabbing a finger into one of the boxes. “Do you see?” he asked, glancing at Harry. “You speak Parseltongue. You-Know-Who spoke Parseltongue. And Grindelwald spoke—well, he didn’t speak to snakes, but he spoke to thestrals, and used them as part of his army.” Fudge sneered. “The connection makes sense. This is only the first of many threads, but it was the one that first led us to suspect that you might be the Dark Lord. Not wise to expose your snake-speaking ability, my lord. Not wise.”

You could take them, Regulus whispered. I’d even support you. You didn’t choose to come here, and I think you should get back to people who love you and can protect you as soon as possible. Hit them with magic, and then go back home. Come on, Harry. You know you could do it.

And that’s precisely why I won’t, Harry snapped back at him. Just because I can doesn’t mean I should. He dragged in a desperate breath, because that temptation was sounding better by the minute, and fixed his eyes on Fudge’s face again. “What are some of the other threads that led you to being sure of my incipient Lordship, sir?” he asked.

Fudge looked mildly disappointed that Harry wasn’t just confessing to being a Dark Lord right then and there, but he nodded and pointed to another box. “The Dark Lord was at the school fifty years ago when the Chamber of Secrets was last opened,” he said. “You were at the school two years ago when the Chamber of Secrets was last opened. Grindelwald—well, he wasn’t at Hogwarts, since he didn’t attend it,

but he was at Durmstrang and held initiations for his Lightning Guard in an underground cave.” He frowned sternly at Harry. “Are you going to dismiss all of this as coincidence?”

“Not especially,” Harry said. “I was opening the Chamber and involved in the Petrifications of students because Voldemort possessed me, sir.” He didn’t miss the way Fudge flinched at the name and glanced over his shoulder, as though he expected to find Voldemort hiding in the corner. “So it wasn’t a coincidence. That doesn’t mean that I’m evil and Dark in and of myself.”

Fudge shook his head. “You won’t get out of this one, Mr. Potter. We know everything.” He pointed to another box. “The armies. Grindelwald used thestrals, because he could speak to them. You-Know-Who made deals with the giants and other creatures to march with him, and of course the werewolf Fenrir Greyback was famous for being part of his evil troops. And now you’ve freed the Dementors.” He turned to Harry, and waited, as if what he wanted to say should be obvious.

Harry stared at him. “I have told the Ministry the truth on that score, sir,” he said. “I sent them back home into nightmares. I didn’t keep them to build a private army out of.” He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Out of all the suspicions that someone might have about why he’d freed the Dementors, he had not thought this would be one of them.

“No one has seen a Dementor since that day,” Fudge intoned. “Did you really banish them, or did you send them somewhere safe and secret, with instructions to breed and wait for you?”

Harry shook his head. “Not that last, sir. I don’t want to be a Lord. I would command no magical creature to attack anyone else.” But you used Sylarana to threaten people, his conscience whispered. Harry winced and shoved it away. “I promise, I’m a loyal subject of wizarding Britain. Is there nothing I can do to prove this to you?” He felt a touch of true nervousness beneath his irritation and pity. He had hoped that he could persuade Fudge as he had so many other people, but the Minister was showing a complete blindness to basic

logic. Harry was not sure what he could manage with dances and rituals.

“Well,” said Fudge. “Perhaps one thing.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, suspicious again. He’d been herded into this, most probably, but now that he was here, he had no choice but to ask, “What thing would that be, Minister?”

“Since you cost us the Dementors and we can no longer keep the prisoners safely in Azkaban,” said Fudge, waving towards a door at the back of the room, “we have a new method of determining whether wizards are safe to be released back into general society.” The door opened, and what appeared to be a silver ball on legs shuffled in, until Harry realized it was actually a device being carried by a short, squat witch. “Subject yourself to our test, and you can prove that you’re loyal.”

You don’t have to, said Regulus in his head, all fire and denial. Why are you subjecting yourself to this, Harry? You’re not an ordinary wizard. You don’t need to behave like one.

That only makes it all the more urgent, Harry snapped back. He wondered why he was surrounded by people so determined to shove him into being above the law. What Regulus had said sounded like something Snape or Draco would have said. Slytherins, honestly. I love them in general, but get exasperated with them in particular.

He turned back to the Minister and nodded. “Of course, sir. What do you need me to do?”

The witch set the device down next to the Minister’s desk, and revealed her face for the first time. Harry couldn’t help but recoil. Her face was all hanging jowls and bright, gleaming eyes. She resembled nothing so much as a toad. To make it worse, she was wearing a pink jumper with small kittens gamboling on it instead of robes, and there were pink bows tied in her lank hair. She looked straight at Harry, and those bright eyes blinked.

"This is my assistant, Dolores Umbridge," said Fudge proudly. "She is the one who has devised the loyalty test, Mr. Potter, and she is the one who will explain it to you." He stepped out of the way.

Umbridge said, "Hem hem." Harry thought at first that she was starting a sentence, but it seemed to be an odd throat-clearing practice. "Step up to the device, sweet child, and put your hands on it. It will measure your loyalty to the Ministry, and if you are loyal enough, it will let you go."

Harry hesitated. "And what happens if I'm not loyal enough?"

Umbridge's eyes gleamed like the sun. "But you have just finished saying that you are loyal, sweet child. I am sure that it will not trouble you." She gave him a grotesque smile. Perhaps the worst thing was that her teeth all looked perfectly clean and brushed. Harry would have been more reassured if they were rotten, so that he would know she'd been eating all the sugar her costume made her look as if she should consume.

Hesitantly, he moved forward, regarding the device. It remained an enormous silver ball, pierced with holes, as though something lived inside it that needed air. It rested on tumblers, and it radiated magic, but what kind, Harry could not tell, not with three other wizards and a witch in the room.

Can you tell what it is? he asked Regulus. Or, at least, what it does?

No. Merlin take you, Harry, don't touch it. Apparate out of here. Hit them all with a bolt of lightning. Do what you have to do to protect and save yourself. If Regulus had a body, Harry thought, he would have been jumping up and down, waving his arms like a chicken to try and scare Harry away from the device.

I don't want to, Harry thought distinctly. If I flee, then they'll have the right to arrest me again and treat me worse than ever. And I'm not going to kill anyone. I can't understand your fascination with it.

He put out his hands and clasped them around the silver ball.

There came a faint shimmer, and then a burst of heat. It wasn't uncomfortable, or Harry didn't think he could have resisted pulling his palms back, but it did seal his hands to the ball. He tugged, unconsciously, and his hands remained right where they were.

"Relax, sweet child," Umbridge whispered. "Just relax. The device is looking through your head now. I am sure that it will find out you are very, ah, loyal to the Ministry. Hem hem."

Harry didn't have much choice but to stand there hugging the ball, anyway, so that was what he did. He felt magic running through his body like water, but couldn't tell what it did. At least it didn't hurt.

He heard a caught breath behind him that he thought came from Grim or Crup. Harry darted a glance over his shoulder, and saw them both leaning forward, watching the device intently. Fudge was standing just beyond them, hands clasped across his middle and a beatific smile on his face.

Harry reminded himself that this was for the best. He really didn't want to fight the Ministry. It would make his primary task, being vates, all the harder. And besides, how could he blame them for wanting confirmation that someone of his magical power was not a Dark Lord? Of course they would fear that, given Voldemort's spectacular rise. They were ordinary wizards. They were people who had lives and souls of their own. He had to understand them.

Then he felt the magic of the device abruptly fill him to brimming. He blinked, feeling as if it would squeeze and drip out his eyes.

The magic began to run out of him, back into the device.

And it pulled some of his own magic with it.

Harry felt his own power rear up in startled outrage, and a moment later, his emotions reared up with it. He grabbed back at his own magic, trying to separate it from what had twined with it.

The device quaked and began to glow warm, cherry red and then gold and then white. It broke apart in his hands, and Harry felt his

palms seared and burned by it. He didn't care. He was too involved in making sure that his magic was in his body. Now he had pooled all the foreign influences into his palm, a swirling dark puddle of foul strength, and he threw it to the floor in disgust.

The puddle swirled around once, then vanished into the remains of the device.

Harry turned back to Umbridge. There was an ugly burn across her face, from where she hadn't got out of the device's way in time, and her toad-eyes were gleaming in shock. She pointed a trembling finger at Harry. "You assaulted the special assistant to the Minister!" she whispered, in a little-girl voice that trembled with outrage. "You assaulted me!"

Harry snarled. His magic was back where it should be, but not at all soothed. "You tried to make me a Squib, under false pretenses," he said. "You should be grateful that all you've got is a burn on your face."

"You are a Dark Lord, then." Fudge's voice was flat, colder and more self-confident than Harry had heard it. "I should have known, and never allowed you this test. You're not loyal to the government of wizarding Britain, not loyal to anyone but yourself, and I was right to pass the laws." Harry turned around in time to see Fudge sticking his hand out at Grim and Crup. "Get him. Confine him, and make sure that he can't use his magic."

Grim started forward, face blank. Crup was grinning, his wand swinging back and forth in his hand with a faint whistling sound.

Harry backed a step, breathing harshly. He could feel his magic surging and dancing, begging to be let through the barriers of his control. And he could do it. So easily. He could cover them in ice, or bind them where they stood, or hit them with a curse that would make them hurt nearly as much as he had under Rosier's Blood-Burning Curse. He could conjure a snake and swallow their magic, making it a permanent part of his own. He could reach out with Legilimency, and, since they wore those collars, probably shatter their minds attempting to enter them.

I don't want to do that. I don't want to hurt them, damn it!

He had to use his magic in some capacity, though, to drain some of it off, so he gestured, with one hand, and whispered Petrificus Totalus in his mind. Grim and Crup stiffened and fell to the floor.

Harry gasped in the silence that followed, seeing Fudge's eyes go wide with fear, as he finally realized that his incipient Dark Lord was not as tame as he had assumed. He started backing up, his mouth flapping up and down. Harry supposed he was trying to come up with a way to calm Harry down or hold him off. Harry remained still, arms wrapped around him like chains, making sure that he couldn't lunge and hurt someone else. He had to remain still. In this moment, he was fragile.

The more he thought about what Fudge had done, the angrier he became.

He kidnapped me. He didn't listen to a word I said. He passed laws that seem to have been targeted specifically at me, if I'm the Dark Lord that Dumbledore thought he might have received word of. He tried to make me a Muggle, or at least a Squib.

Harry wrapped the rage in the quicksilver pools that Snape had taught him, and felt calmness coming back to him like the return of a tide. He could do this. He was not his magic or his fury. He was more than that. And it was not as though what they had done to him was unforgivable. He could get past this. He rubbed his forehead with one seared palm.

Then Umbridge whispered something behind him, and Harry felt his back light up with pain, as though a white-hot knife were striking between his shoulders.

His magic attacked the place in a moment and banished the curse, but the damage had been done. Harry swung on the witch, and saw her just lowering her wand, a look of alarm twisting the burn on her cheek.

She did that, he snarled to himself, low in his mind. They should not be doing this. What they have done should not be done to any witch or wizard. How many people did they drain of their magic before me? How many others would Grim and Crup confine and bring in if I didn't do something about it?

Then even that excuse for being angry fell away, and he was just purely enraged about what they had done to him.

I did nothing to deserve this.

He advanced on Umbridge, and his magic woke and filled the room like a storm.

Chapter Nine: A Kind of Wild Justice

Harry didn't know the part of himself that woke as he stepped forward and fixed his gaze on Umbridge.

He had met his rage before. He had met his magic before. He knew about cold fury, and his frustration with his brother, and the absolute pain of betrayal he'd felt when he used the justice ritual on Lily.

He had never known this.

It came out of him in a rush, breathing past his face in a poisonous musk, coiling in front of him as a visible dark serpent with stars for eyes. He stared at it as it twisted back around and focused on him, and found himself shivering, and not from cold. He could still feel the flare of pain in his back from where Umbridge's unknown spell had struck him. Between the shoulder blades, slightly higher than the middle of that area, and nearer the right one.

It was wrong that she had struck him like that.

It was not to be borne.

Harry discovered in that instant that he could want another human being to hurt, as deeply and dearly and devotedly as he had once wanted the sun to rise so that he could spend more time learning spells in the light and not reading a book under his covers with Lumos.

The serpent had its permission. It sped away from him in a graceful slide, and ended up coiled around one of Umbridge's ankles, or so Harry assumed from its position under her robes. He found himself smiling. It was a lazy expression, one the muscles of his face made without his consent.

He nodded.

The serpent bit. He knew it, not because he could see it, but because he willed it so, and so it happened. The fangs cut into Umbridge's skin and sent icy cold venom flowing into her veins. She screamed, and staggered.

Behind him, Harry heard a voice—Fudge’s—reciting some kind of charm desperately. It was probably something to disarm him.

Foolish, considering I don’t have my wand, Harry thought idly, and raised a hand without looking away from his serpent, which was now slithering up Umbridge’s calf, a ripple under her robes.

The witch screamed and kicked, and then her leg fell dead. She stared at it, and gripped it, and tried to move it. Harry knew what it would feel like in her hands: dead weight, dead stone. He had willed it so, and so it happened.

Behind him, Fudge started to say something else, since Harry had interrupted his first spell with that simple gesture, and then subsided, with a choking, coughing cry. Harry knew there was another snake wound about his throat, glowing the deepest green color of the Forbidden Forest in sunlight, its magic waiting on a command that would strangle Fudge or otherwise hurt him.

He hissed the command in Parseltongue, just to make it more frightening, and the black snake bit down again, this time high on Umbridge’s leg, near the hip. There were no words for how she screamed. Harry half-closed his eyes, understanding for the first time how his father might have gone mad and held Bellatrix Lestrange under Crucio for ten minutes, how Bellatrix might have felt when she was torturing the Longbottoms, the reasons why Dark wizards used Unforgivable Curses.

It was a moment of sheer power over one’s enemy, knowing that someone who had caused him pain was paying for it.

One more time, Harry thought, and then hissed it in Parseltongue.

The black snake moved higher, and its fangs drove home one more time, under Umbridge’s ribs on her left side. Umbridge gave another wail, and then simply toppled over. Her left side was frozen, all life gone, though it still looked like flesh. She might limp about with her right leg, gesture with her right hand, speak from the right side of her mouth, animate her right cheek and right eye. It didn’t matter. Half of

her would always be dead, a frozen grotesque, caught in the last motion it had made.

Harry became aware, abruptly, that he was laughing. He wasn't sure when it had started, after the last snakebite or before. He wondered if it was really necessary to know.

The black snake flowed away from the half-motionless, half-thrashing Umbridge, and skimmed across the air to him, its sides lifting and rippling like butterfly wings. Harry extended an arm, and felt the serpent coil around it, head coming to rest on the back of his wrist, lazy hiss a music to his ears. Harry ran a hand down its spine and dipped his head, inhaling its scent. Ice and wind and stone.

He turned, slowly, to face the Minister. Fudge was staring at him, one hand clasped loosely around his wand, his breathing hardly audible. The green snake around his throat turned its head at once to focus on Harry, though it tightened a few of its coils so that Fudge wouldn't forget who currently controlled his life.

Harry nodded back to the Minister. "Hello, sir." His voice sounded normal. His heard was full of rushing blackness, still, and dancing snakes, and wasn't entirely normal. Not normal at all, he thought. "I suppose you might be wondering why I reacted the way I did."

Fudge's breath climbed higher, coming in whistling gasps. Harry hissed a command at the green serpent—since it was made of his magic, it would obey him in a way that Sylarana or the Many would not have—and the snake eased its hold a bit, though it could still easily strike at any place on the Minister's chest or throat.

"An unfortunate combination of magical attack and outrage," said Harry, shrugging. He knew the words were true. They made sense, somewhere, in the gray rationality that was part of his brain. The chaos behind that was screaming, and something was trying to rise to the surface, but Harry would deal with it in a moment. "I tried and tried to give you excuses, reasons not to do this, chances to recognize what you were doing and back out." He blinked at Fudge. His eyes were burning. He didn't know with what. Even if flying drops of the black serpent's poison had hit him, they wouldn't make his eyes burn.

“And then you tried to drain my magic, and I realized what it meant, that you have these laws and these Hounds and that sphere—” He darted a glance at the silver device that had tried to steal his magic, now shattered beyond all repair. “Well. You had that sphere.” He looked back at Fudge. “You would have used them on more people than just me, used them to terrify and beat into submission and compel. And then Umbridge hit me with the spell, and that tipped the balance of my mind over for that one moment.” He shrugged. “It’s not something that happens often. With luck, it will never happen again.”

And then the rising emotion broke through the surface, and Harry understood the stinging in his eyes. He was crying, or at least on the verge of tears. He hurt and ached, with shame and with guilt.

He had hurt another human being. But even that wasn’t the core of it, because he had done that before, both intentionally and unintentionally.

The core of it was that he had enjoyed it.

Harry controlled the rolling nausea, the desire to flee or set the black serpent on himself. None of them were useful reactions. Let them go too far, and he would end up like James, turning his back on the darkness that he was capable of. He would take what was useful from this matter, and that only.

That was the shame, and the guilt, and his burning comprehension of what he was, what lay under the persona of compassion and forgiveness he had tried so hard to cultivate. He looked full-on into the face of sadism and desire for pain, and he made himself keep looking.

This is not what happens when I get angry.

This is what happens when I get angry and act without thinking. This is what happens when, even if for just one moment and blindly and instinctually and because people have been unreasonable, I hate.

He studied it carefully. He had felt the emotion, of course. He had hated Voldemort when he thought of what the Dark Lord was capable

of, attacking and trying to kill an innocent baby. And he had hated other people who had tried to hurt others.

But he had had something to pull him back to reality, all those other hatreds before. He'd been far from his target, or he'd had other people in danger and been able to concentrate on defending them instead of attacking just to inflict pain.

This time, he'd not had those, and the touch of physical pain had pushed him into a burning desire to make the person who'd hurt him hurt, even if just for a moment.

That was the difference. He would look at that, and he would learn that, and he would make sure that he never felt it again.

I cannot afford vengeance. What am I, if I turn to it? Someone else might take vengeance without causing much more than a slap and a few hurtful words. When I do it, I maim.

Harry clenched a hand in front of him and closed his eyes, hissing to the serpent. The black snake flowed away from him again, and he heard a little whimper of fear from Umbridge. Harry did not look as the snake settled on her again. Yes, it would have to bite her once more, but it would be only three bites, and then it would draw back the cold poison and leave her free.

Harry was sick, and shaking, and very tired, and ashamed of himself to his heart. Umbridge and Fudge and Grim and Crup and all the others who might have helped in the doing of this were still people. He had the right to fight back and defend himself and others from them. He did not have the right to torture them, or treat their lives as if they were worth less than his was. He did not have the right to treat them as if they had no souls, no lives, wishes, hopes, dreams of their own, or as if they had never laughed or done anything good.

He did not want to live in a world in which that was true.

What he could do was make sure they did not do anything like this to anyone else again, in the future.

Harry lifted his head and opened his eyes. He could hear Umbridge's desperate, crying whimpers subsiding behind him as she gained back control of her left side, and the Minister's eyes were still wide and fixed on him. Harry moved a hand, and the green serpent dissolved into mist. Fudge shook his head, touched his neck as though to make sure the snake was really gone, and then took a deep breath.

"I know what you're about to say, Minister," said Harry quietly. "That only a Dark Lord would do the things I have done."

Fudge squinted at him. "Are you going to deny that that was Dark magic, Potter? Or that you caused my assistant pain?"

Harry sighed. His own nails had been cutting into his palms, and he hadn't realized it. He flicked his fingers, partially to ease the pain and partially to dissolve the black serpent, now that it was no longer needed. "No. I am sorry about that, Minister."

He lifted his head. Fudge was staring at him.

"But," said Harry, and let just a trace of hardness slip into his voice, "I will not be sorry if I hear that you have continued using your Hounds to arrest people, or forced this ridiculous registration on anyone else, or tried to drain anyone else's magic." He took a step forward. "You know what I can do now." He flicked his hand, once, twice, and the bindings on Grim and Crup eased. They climbed to their feet, eyes warily fixed on him, but made no move to reach for their wands. "Do you really want to anger me?"

Fudge blustered, "Everything we used was Light! The sphere came from the house of a respected Light wizard family! The spell Dolores used on you was in defense of her own life! Even the collars my Hounds wear could not be put on without their consent, and serve to defend their minds from Dark influences—"

Harry felt a faint sensation of relief that he wouldn't be responsible for freeing the Hounds, coupled with irritation that Fudge continued to babble. "Sir," he said, his tone barely controlled, "shut up."

Fudge shut up.

Harry breathed in and out and in again, until his anger was his to master once more. Then he said, "This is the bargain I'll make with you. Cease using your Hounds at once. Split them up and mix them back in to other departments. Concentrate on rehabilitating Azkaban and assigning human guards to the prisoners there. The Hounds might do nicely," he added, and his voice leaked bitterness. He clamped down on it. He needed to be calm, controlled. "And strike these ridiculous edicts directed at certain Dark talents from the books. You might ask the full Wizengamot about any in the future that you feel are a good idea."

"And what will I gain?" Fudge demanded.

Harry lifted his head. Stupid, and beyond stupid, but I can't start a war with the Ministry, and just because he is stupid does not mean I have the right to hurt him. "My silence," he said with absolute evenness. "I will not tell anyone about what I have learned in this room today, about events—including the kidnapping of an innocent child, the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, taken to the Ministry without even his guardian to accompany him—that could utterly destroy you, Minister."

Fudge's face went white. Harry nodded. There was a reason all this had been kept secret, with the Dark wizard registration laws the only ripple to mar the surface. Fudge was aware of what the wizarding public would and would not tolerate, or at least the outer limits of it.

And still Fudge whispered, "We all know that isn't what happened here. And we would have the word of four against one."

Harry snorted aloud. "I am willing to take Veritaserum," he said. "Are you?"

Fudge's hands locked together near his mouth, as though he could imagine the damaging truths spewing forth from it.

Harry nodded. "But I can easily enough tell everyone the truth, about everything, if I get a hint that you haven't kept our bargain. I am willing to trade you the past for the future, but only if you keep these events in the past."

"That truth would include that you're a Dark wizard, and use Dark magic," Fudge said.

He must have been a Gryffindor. He doesn't know when to give up. And, right now, I have to be Slytherin. Harry locked his face into the calm mask that Lily had taught him to perfect, looked the Minister in the eye, and said, "I don't care about that."

He was lying.

He cared about that. So much. He did not want it revealed, did not think the wizarding public would care to call a boy innocent who would create snakes out of magic and set them on the Minister and the Special Assistant to the Minister. He did not want to see the horror in the eyes of students at Hogwarts whom he had persuaded, with careful effort, not to cringe when he walked by. He did not want to see the doubt in his allies' faces, as they reconsidered whether he could ever be a Dark Lord. He could imagine all the attention fixed on him if this got out.

He did not want it.

But he had managed to bluff Fudge into thinking that all he got out of this deal was the cessation of his stupidity, he saw, when he could focus again. Fudge was nodding furiously, and muttering himself blue in the face. Harry turned his head, and saw Umbridge bobbing her head too, though her toad-eyes were furious. Grim and Crup watched him with expressions of a deep and familiar loathing, but they inclined their heads when Harry stared at him.

It was done. It was done. Harry could feel his knees beginning to wobble. He had to get out of there before anyone saw.

"Remember, Minister," he whispered. "One sign."

Fudge nodded again, and Harry turned and left the room through the door that Umbridge had come in by, striking blindly for the lifts and the Auror Office. He wondered, briefly, who was responsible for

cleaning the room he'd been in, given the beetle that zipped past him with its wings buzzing as he opened the door.

Well, Rufus Scrimgeour thought to himself as he led a group of Aurors towards the tenth level of the Ministry, from which an enormous burst of magic had come welling, this is certainly turning into an interesting afternoon.

First had come the owls, hurtling through his windows like the small magical weapons the Glendorryn brothers had used in the First War, bearing piece after piece of news. Two former Aurors, both sacked, had been spotted entering and leaving the Ministry on several occasions, with sightings of both confirmed just this morning. Harry Potter had spoken Parseltongue in Knockturn Alley, and then Apparated with an obviously illegal bunch of South African hive cobras. No one could find the Minister, and several of his people who'd been waiting to deliver reports to the fellow wanted to know what they should do now.

Severus Snape, Harry Potter's guardian, had written a single terse message saying his charge had been kidnapped by two gray-cloaked wizards calling themselves Hounds, and that the methods he had of tracking Harry had fallen afoul of powerful wards, most likely the Ministry's.

Rufus could put together a puzzle as well as any wizard and better than most, which was part of the reason he was Head Auror, and though he didn't know all the details, he had a clear sense of the general outline.

Something was rotten in the heart of Minister Fudge.

Had been for a long time, really, Rufus thought absently, as he and his team descended past the Department of Mysteries. Cornelius had been a good enough sort in the beginning, coasting into power on the benign promises, empty of substance, that had won many Ministers election in the past. And he had done no worse than most: half-hearted meddlesome do-gooding, and then a whole-hearted plunge into public relations. Rufus was used to working around Ministers rather than with them, and this was no different.

And then Cornelius started becoming afraid.

Rumor traced it back to a werewolf attack several years ago that he'd barely survived, or to the defection of a good friend to the Dark, or simply to the rumors circulating among the scum they brought to Azkaban of the Dark Lord's return. Rufus didn't know. He didn't really care about the cause. He saw the effects, and the effects rotted the Minister from the inside out, turned him into a shameless puppet swayed towards any "Light" wizard who wanted to whisper the right, reassuring words into his ear.

Rufus had watched the dissolution of the Minister's bribery-fueled friendships with some Dark families, like the Malfoys, with high satisfaction, but when Cornelius was all but dancing attendance on replacements who soothed him with lies and half-truths and whispered elaborate plans to "secure the future against the Dark," he didn't think the result was a net gain for his Ministry.

You don't cower in fear from the Dark, for Merlin's sake, Rufus thought, as he approached the door to level ten, his cloak flaring out behind him and his limp so smoothly integrated into his stride that it never marred it. You fight it.

The door opened before he could get there. Rufus halted and brought his wand up in front of him.

Harry Potter stood there, and he stank of Dark magic.

Rufus's nose twitched, but he forced himself to lower his wand. Yes, he'd dedicated himself to Light magic so early and so young that he could literally smell it when a wizard used other kinds of spells, a claim that he was content to have remain as rumor. That didn't mean that he was ready to strike a child just for using it, especially when Potter lifted his head and fixed his eyes on Rufus's.

Something has happened, Rufus thought. Those green eyes were too like the eyes of children who had been infected with lycanthropy, the eyes of women who'd survived a centaur rampage, the eyes of Voldemort's last victim on record before he went after the Potters,

Alba Starrise, who'd said softly, over and over, that she was fine, and then hanged herself in her cell when Rufus went to fetch her tea.

He spoke the same words he spoke then, his voice low, soothing. His team came up behind him and stopped. He heard young Percy Weasley gulp audibly, but the others remained silent. They knew better than to interrupt him when he was like this. "It's all right. I'm here to protect you. What happened, Harry?"

The boy blinked, once, twice. He lifted a hand to touch his face, as though surprised that emotion was showing there.

Then he straightened and shut the emotion away behind a stern mask. It was one of the most impressive things Rufus had ever seen, and one of the most outrageous. Potter simply sealed his face, and then looked him right in the eye and said, "Nothing."

He was a practiced liar, that much was clear. Rufus might even have believed him, if he hadn't seen those eyes.

His gaze went to the door from level ten, but no one could be seen there. Of course, most of the workers would probably have fled the explosion of magic, which had certainly come from Potter.

He leaned down towards Potter and whispered, "Why are you here, then? Your guardian sent me word that you'd been abducted."

"A misunderstanding," Potter said, his voice light, dismissive. "Could you take me to him, please? I'd like to see him."

Rufus considered. Snape wasn't there—no, wait, probably by now he was. Rufus had left instructions for him to be admitted to his office at once when he arrived, partially to content the man and partially to prevent him from going anywhere else and doing anything...unfortunate. Rufus believed he had accurately taken the measure of Severus Snape. The man was a devoted, driven guardian. He was also a Dark wizard who had been accused of being a Death Eater. Rufus intended to forget neither.

But the desperate hope in the boy's voice was no fakery.

Rufus decided that questions could wait. He nodded and extended a hand. "Come with me," he said.

Harry hesitated, then shook his head. "With all due respect, sir, I really don't need to hold anyone's hand." He strode ahead of Rufus then, parting the ranks of the stunned and silent Aurors, and paused to look back at Rufus. "Your office, sir?"

Rufus made a certain resolve then. He knew he could keep it. Scrimgeours always kept their word, and he had done it without fail since he was twelve years old.

He was going to find out what had happened, what had caused a child to look like that in his own Ministry, and when he'd discovered the corruption, he would tear it out root and branch.

He'd been in Slytherin, but the Sorting Hat had recommended Hufflepuff to him. Once Rufus Scrimgeour began digging, he would not stop.

For now, though, it was kinder to pretend to believe the lie, and the boy should be back with people who loved him. He nodded.

"My office," he said, and walked up the corridor behind Harry, who held his back as straight as a sword.

He did manage to catch Percy Weasley's eye as he passed, and gave him a stern glance. If this doesn't measure and weigh him, nothing will.

Percy's shoulders and chin dropped, snatching his eyes from Rufus's gaze. But then he looked up, and steel gleamed under the surface of his face.

Rufus hid a smile. My judgment was not in error, then. Of course, when it comes to recognizing potential Aurors, it very rarely is. Snape sat, once again, in the office crowded with more photographs than could ever be of use to anyone, speaking of a life lived to the corners, and sipped the tea that Scrimgeour's assistant had brought

him, and tried to think of nothing at all. Scrimgeour had gone in search of a burst of magic that he thought was most likely Harry, that assistant had told him, but he had refused to reveal what level the burst had come from. There was nothing else that Snape could do, unless he wanted to run through the Auror Office and threaten people into telling him. And there were Aurors who had passed the door, glanced inside, and nodded to him who would prevent that. He knew it.

Harry was safe. He was going to be all right.

Snape told himself that, because considering anything else was counterproductive.

He did let his mind slip to what had happened after Harry was abducted, and felt a seizure of rage in his chest. The gray-cloaked wizard who had followed Harry and the first one in their Apparition had cast some kind of glittering dust on the ground as he Apparated out. Snape didn't recognize it, but it reacted with the dirt and rose in a choking cloud that kept him coughing for long moments.

Then he'd tried to get a hold on Harry with the passive link the potion had created between them—and failed. The dust had prevented that, he thought, slowing his brain and confusing the bond. Or perhaps it was the Ministry's wards, because even when the effect of the dust seemed to fade, he still could sense nothing from his charge, even the distant rush of panicked thoughts.

Snape had entered the school. He had made his way to the Headmaster's office and told Albus what had happened. Albus's eyebrows could still make his face formidable when he frowned, Snape found. Albus had turned and firecalled the Minister from his own hearth without a pause.

After long moments of talking to an obviously frightened young wizard, the Headmaster had turned around and shaken his head, as Snape had suspected would happen. "The Minister is not currently available," he said quietly.

Snape had nodded and swept from the office, ignoring Albus's tense call behind him.

He had knelt down in front of his own hearth, his mind curiously calm, and firecalled the Malfoys. He did not know where Harry was, and if he had, wards would probably prevent him from Apparating in. He did not know who the Hounds were, or what they wanted. If he went charging into this situation without information, he could get Harry killed.

He had to sit on the panic, and the fury about his panic, that had made him act irrationally all day today, both with the goblins and with the snakes. He had not kept Harry safe by lashing out. So he would make sure that he did not do it this time, that his actions were controlled and Slytherin.

Harry could be dying right this moment, and because of the wards, you wouldn't know it.

Snape shook his head slightly. No, he wouldn't know it. That meant that it was still best to be rational about this. And that meant gaining information. At least he could take vengeance on Harry's killers, if he could not save his charge himself.

Snape plunged his head into the flames at the right moment, and found himself staring into the small antechamber where Narcissa had welcomed him at Christmas. A crack was presumably a house elf Apparating to tell someone that he was calling. Snape cracked his impatience, threw it into one of the quicksilver pools of his mind, and waited.

Draco came through the door to the room at a dead run, barely caught himself from slipping on a rug, and looked at Snape with an ashen face. Snape found it easier to be serene after seeing him, incredibly. The knowledge that someone else was terrified seemed to relieve his own fear.

"Sir?" Draco whispered. "What happened to Harry?"

Snape said quietly, "The Ministry's kidnapped him, Draco. I need you to fetch your father. I need someone with connections in the Ministry, someone who might be able to find out where they took Harry."

"What seems to be the problem, Severus?"

Lucius Malfoy strode in behind his son, his face frozen marble. Snape did not waste time loathing him for his calmness, and instead outlined the situation with the precision that he'd learned to use when he was a spy among the Death Eaters for the Order of the Phoenix. He included the dust and the gray cloaks and the names of the Hounds as details, because if anything could identify the department of the wizards who had kidnapped Harry, those were the things.

And then he had to watch Lucius Malfoy shake his head slowly, a frown on his face.

"The Minister no longer speaks to me," he said quietly. "And none of those sound familiar."

Snape hissed under his breath. At least Lucius had been honest, though. This would have taken longer if Snape had had to wade through lying games to find out how much the other man knew.

"Very well," he said. "We do have an ally inside the Ministry itself, though he has no fireplace in his office that I saw. I will write to him. Thank you for your help." He nodded curtly to both Draco and Lucius, and made to withdraw.

"There is something else I can do," said Lucius, unexpectedly. "Adalrico Bulstrode's wife Elfrida works with the goblins, insuring that coins passed in Diagon Alley are real. She is at least nearer the Ministry than we are. I will contact Adalrico, and ask him to inform his wife of this."

Snape nodded tightly. "Thank you." The Bulstrodes were Harry's formal allies, and the more people who knew of this, the better.

"It will not stop there," Lucius assured him. "Others will hear of this." He was smiling faintly now, a hard, cold fire in his eyes. Snape

studied him. He doubted highly that Lucius cared for Harry as Snape or his son did, but he seemed to be enjoying the challenge that these politics represented. And, of course, he was in the middle of a truce-dance with Harry, and he would want to see Harry survive to the end of it. "The Parkinsons are also allied to him, and my wife speaks to Hawthorn regularly. And there are others who will be...interested."

Snape felt a hard fire of his own take hold in his chest. "Thank you," he repeated.

He glanced once at Draco, and felt a stab of pity for the boy. Draco's eyes were wide, his breathing just on the edge of taking in too little air. Snape sighed. Among the many, many things he would speak to Harry about—

If they got Harry back alive.

--was how he planned to conduct his deepening friendship with Lucius Malfoy's son. Snape had slowly become worried over the boy's obsession with Harry. Draco needed to be his own person, needed to have some interests and hobbies and life of his own.

"Please let me know when you find him," Draco whispered.

Snape nodded. He thought the boy would have asked to come with him, but not with his father there. "I will," he said, and then pulled his head out of the flames and turned to write the letter to Rufus Scrimgeour. A different bird had answered him almost at once, one of the Ministry falcons bred for speed, inviting him to come to Scrimgeour's office.

And now, here he sat.

Then he felt magic flood the air, or the spent remains of magic, and the bond snapped into place between him and his ward again, filled with dark, sluggish, churning emotions.

Snape was on his feet and turning in an instant. Harry came into the office with Scrimgeour and other Aurors not far behind him.

Snape looked at him. Harry looked as cool as if he had merely gone for one of his walks in the Forbidden Forest. That was only on the surface, of course. Snape knelt down and held out his arms, not caring for Scrimgeour. At least the man had turned his back, and was shooing the other Aurors out of the office, as well.

Harry bowed his head and moved forward, hugging Snape carefully, as though he thought he would vanish in a moment. Snape closed his eyes and let the panic dissipate completely. He said nothing. He didn't think that there was anything he could say and do this moment justice.

Of course, then the moment passed, and he sat back and met Harry's eyes and asked, "What happened?"

Harry regarded him, calm and alert. "Nothing," he said quietly. "The Minister blustered at me until he realized that I wasn't a threat. Then he let me go."

Snape stared at him in disbelief. The boy was lying, of course—he must be—but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that Harry had forcibly calmed his swirling emotions and hardened them into steely determination. Seemingly, he was not about to tell Snape the actual truth of what had happened.

"You were abducted," Snape whispered. "I heard them read you charges."

"All a ruse," said Harry. He didn't smile, perhaps because he knew it would have been manic, but his eyes remained as determined and steady as ever they had been. "The Minister wanted a pretext to haul me in under the Dark wizarding laws, so he found one. We had a talk about it. In the end, he saw sense, and let me go."

"That is a lie," Snape said.

"It's the truth," said Harry. "Nothing happened between us."

"Something did," Scrimgeour interjected, turning around abruptly. Snape snarled at himself for forgetting the man was still there. At

least his eyes were fixed on Harry, and not Snape. "You let go a burst of magic strong enough that we felt it through the wards all the way up here."

Up here? Harry had been held somewhere below, then. Snape intended to find out where.

Harry's eyes gave a brief flicker, and the tight coil of his emotions threatened to collapse. His breath sawed at his lungs, but he turned to Scrimgeour and shook his head. "I'm afraid that you must be mistaken, sir. The burst of magic had to have come from something else."

"I do not think so," said Scrimgeour.

Harry simply regarded him.

"You were abducted," Snape began again.

Harry turned to him with a faint frown. "I wish you would stop calling it that, sir. It's too dramatic a word. The Minister wanted me to come for a visit, and he chose a somewhat pretentious and abrupt way of inviting me, I admit. But it is all settled now. It was all a misunderstanding."

"When someone snatches a child without his guardian or his parent," Scrimgeour said, in a gentle tone that Snape knew he could not have managed through his astonished fury, "and gives them no choice about coming along, then we call that abduction, Harry. What the Minister did to you was illegal."

"To be punished, it has to come to trial, doesn't it?" Harry asked, as though this were a matter of academic interest.

Scrimgeour nodded.

"This won't," said Harry, and shrugged. "I am not going to call it abduction. I won't file charges against the Minister, or the Ministry for that matter."

Snape snarled and grabbed his shoulder, turning him. Harry simply pivoted under his hand and stared up at him, face expressionless.

"I will file them, Harry," he told him, wanting his charge to make no mistake about this. "I know the names of the men who abducted you."

"Invited me, sir. And you do?" Harry asked.

"Of course. The Hounds."

Harry laughed softly. "That isn't their official title, sir. I'm sure that you won't find them referred to by that name anywhere in Minister Fudge's records."

"I think I may know," said Scrimgeour. "I have had reports of two ex-Aurors, sacked for gross negligence of their duty, coming and going from the building lately."

Snape did not miss the way Harry's body stiffened. His voice grew high and strained, but he still did not lash out, though the magic circling him bubbled as though he were in a pool at the foot of a waterfall. "I will ask you this only once, sir. Please, please leave it. I will not testify in any trial. I have reason to believe that the Minister won't use this method of inviting people to see him again, and that the talk we had has no reason to be repeated. I will not cooperate with you on this. I don't want to fight with you. Either of you," he added, turning his eyes wearily to Snape. "But I gave my word, and this is done."

"You gave your word?" Snape knew his voice was dangerously soft. He couldn't help it. He could feel the desire to take vengeance swallowing him alive, tearing away at all the softer parts of him.

Harry nodded, his face firm. "Yes. This is done."

"It is not right, Harry," Snape said, feeling his frustration build. Surely, the boy had to see that? "Your rights were violated. The Minister might do this to other people—"

Harry shook his head, an expression Snape had never seen in his eyes. “No, he won’t. We did—discuss that.”

Snape snarled at him.

Harry matched him, stare for stare, the Occlumency shields burning behind his eyes.

Something else happened to him, Snape thought. There is no reason that he would be so reluctant to tell us this if it were merely him playing the part of victim—even on the scale of what happened with Black last year. Did he do something?

“Harry,” he said, keeping his voice low and soothing, “you know that whatever you may have done, particularly in defense of your own life, is excusable.”

Harry flinched, flinched with soul and body both, and then tucked his chin into his chest. “Please,” he whispered. “Please, leave it, leave it if you love me.”

Snape reached out a careful hand. “Harry—“

Harry shook his head, wild hair flying. “I’d like to be by myself for a few minutes before we go back to Hogwarts,” he said, and darted a glance at Scrimgeour. “If you don’t mind.”

Scrimgeour shook his head, and Harry opened the door to his office and ducked out before Snape could stop him. When he moved to follow his charge, Scrimgeour reached out and put a hand on his arm.

“No,” he said quietly. “I think what he said is true, and he does need to be alone.”

“He can’t hide from this long,” said Snape, and heard the frustration in his own voice snap like melting ice. “It is not natural. And his allies have already been informed. They do have the right, under the terms of alliance, to ask for formal satisfaction from the Minister himself, or challenge him in court in Harry’s place.”

“To do that, however, we must still know the details of what happened,” said Scrimgeour, “and we will not get those from Harry in his current state, nor from the Minister ever, by his choice.” His gaze was calm on Snape’s face. “I can tell you one thing. I felt Dark magic lingering around Harry when he opened the door. My guess is that he did something with that Dark magic, something he is violently ashamed of.”

Snape understood in a few moments, remembering Harry’s grief over killing the Dark Lord in Rodolphus’s body. If anything like that had happened, or even on a smaller scale, he would want to hide. Snape wondered if Harry thought they could not forgive him, whatever it was, and felt sick.

No one else was there with him, most likely—no one else to defend, no one else he could have used or excused the Dark magic for. He was defending himself. And now he feels ashamed.

He longed to go after Harry and reassure him that of course they could forgive him, that whatever he had done was probably not bad enough to require forgiveness in the first place, but Scrimgeour’s hand clamped lightly on his wrist and drew his attention.

“What?” he growled, facing the Auror.

“I think this matter too important to be left up to silence, even as you do.” Scrimgeour’s eyes were narrowed as if he were looking into the sun. “If my Minister is a man like this, one who would kidnap children and make deals with them, then I want to know. And there is one place to start, even if Harry is not yet in any shape to tell us. I will give you the names and descriptions of the ex-Aurors my people saw.”

Snape nodded, regret and relief rushing through him in a simultaneous torrent. He would grant Harry his moments alone, but he could do little more. He would have to push this forward, threaten and fight it, no matter what Harry’s wishes were.

The Minister had simply gone too far this time.

“You’re acting stupid, you know.”

Harry had been leaning on a wall in a disused closet for the past few minutes, trying frantically to stem both his fear and his sorrow. He straightened now and whipped around, his hands clenching.

A witch stood in the doorway of the closet, her mouth pinched in a small, hard smile as she watched him. Her hair was blonde and set in curls that could not be natural, given that they didn't shift even as she turned her head to study Harry better. Her face was crusted with makeup, at least around her eyebrows, and her glasses crusted with jewels. Harry could see a scroll of parchment in one hand and a quill in the other. She managed to lean one shoulder casually on the side of the door despite her hands being full.

"What do you mean?" Harry whispered, wondering if this was someone else who had ideas about how he should use his magic.

"My name's Rita Skeeter," said the woman.

Harry stiffened and narrowed his eyes.

"Oh, yes, glare at me if you want," said Skeeter, sounding unaffected. "But this is your chance, you know. And you're wasting it. That's why I said you were stupid." She made a wide gesture with her parchment that caused it to shake, as if what she said should be self-evident.

"I don't know what you mean," said Harry, returning to his calm mask and voice again.

"I saw everything that happened in the Ministry's interrogation rooms," said Skeeter. "And I do mean everything."

Harry stood in silence for a moment, if one could call the thundering staccato of his heart in his ears silence.

"And I am going to publish that story," Skeeter said, examining her quill. "But it could be a better story if I could speak to an eyewitness." She glanced up at him, eyes hard as the jewels on her glasses. "A willing eyewitness, one who's able to confirm every detail. And one who, should he cooperate with me, can seize control of the ripples

that are going to spread from this moment.” She shook her head, a faint smile on her face. “This can’t stay secret, child. It’s too big. And the wizarding public deserves to know the truth about their Minister, anyway.”

“That’s only your excuse,” Harry whispered.

“Of course it is,” said Skeeter, sounding faintly impatient. “But, you see, there’s a difference between breaking a scandal that everyone involved will deny, and breaking a truth that’s going to make me a heroine. And I’m tired of the first.” She leaned forward and locked eyes with him. “I’m offering you the chance here, Potter. Refuse, and I’ll just publish the story anyway. Cooperate with me, and I am going to make you look damn good.” Her eyes glinted. “What do you say?”

“I gave my word to the Minister—” Harry whispered.

“He’ll break it,” said Skeeter. “It’ll get broken. I told you, this is too big. There are already other people who are aware that something’s wrong, anyway. I was in the Head Auror’s office, too. Your guardian’s already broken the word to your allies.”

Harry felt an abrupt surge of panic. Could he reach out and tell them that it was nothing, that they couldn’t worry about it—

No. No, I can’t.

Harry swallowed, feeling as if it were acid instead of saliva in his mouth. No, he didn’t have the right to restrict anyone else’s free will like that. Snape only knowing the truth was one thing, because there weren’t many people who would take his word against the Ministry’s, given his past. But the Parkinsons, the Bulstrodes, and, oh Merlin help him, the Malfoys...

Harry’s ability to keep his word to Fudge had relied on them never finding out. He knew that once they had an inkling of the truth, they would pursue it to the end.

And lying to them would weaken their trust in him. And that was not permissible.

Being vates and a trustworthy ally is worth more to me, he realized, the thoughts bounding like boulders, than hiding what I've done, or keeping my word to Fudge.

He breathed slowly, carefully, in and out, in and out. Another truth was staring him in the face now, even as his sadism had earlier.

I can't hide from this. I can't recoil from this. I can't sit on this, and I can't run.

Draco was right. There are moments when I am going to have to step out into the light, and act like a leader even if I'm not one, and not give the credit or the blame or the burden to anyone else.

Harry felt as if he rode a wave that was about to break and crash any moment. He remembered the beach in Northumberland on Midsummer, the distant breakers rising beyond the tame little ones. They had fallen and roared and destroyed their walls of dark gray water, but the foam spinning from their tops had sparked and dazzled Harry in the sunlight.

I will have to hope that this brings light, and not just destruction.

He met Skeeter's eyes. "When do we go to press?"

Chapter Ten: Alliance and Defiance

A year since her first transformation. A year since her first full moon.

That was the substance of Hawthorn Parkinson's thoughts as she prepared herself to go to the Ministry and meet with Potter. Oh, physically she was facing a mirror and using a pale ribbon to tie her blonde hair out of her face, but mentally she was back in the storage shed where she had made her husband and daughter lock her, a beast without Wolfsbane, yelping and tearing at the walls.

A year ago this day, she had not even been certain that she wanted to live. At the moment, she could not imagine anything she wanted more.

She carefully arranged the ribbon pointing to one side, and then turned to face the welcoming room where Elfrida was waiting on the other side of the Gringotts fireplace. She halted when she saw the dark figure of her husband, Dragonsbane, in the way. Usually he would have let her go without question. Necromancers tended to avoid crowds, partly because there were still prejudices against and uneasiness around them, and partly because it was wearying for them, knowing when every witch and wizard they saw would die.

Yet here Dragonsbane was, standing determinedly still, in the way that meant he wanted to go with her.

Are you certain? Hawthorn asked him with her hands. He could not speak aloud to her except on two nights of the year, Halloween and Walpurgis.

Dragonsbane made the subtle move within his black hood that indicated a nod. He held out an arm to her.

Hawthorn smiled and took it, kissing him on the cheek, or the cloth that covered his cheek, as they proceeded into the welcoming room. She had never asked him when she would die, though she knew he saw it; she had never even felt a temptation to know. There was living dangerously, and there was living from day to day. Hawthorn preferred the latter, though she kept an eye always on the future.

Elfrida's head still hovered in the flames, that of a pale and pretty witch with ash blonde hair and too wide blue eyes. "Both of you are coming through?" she asked, gaze darting to Dragonsbane.

Hawthorn nodded.

Elfrida blinked, then shrugged. "Say Gringotts Fourth," she instructed them, and pulled her head out of the flames.

Hawthorn gathered up a pinch of Floo powder from the dish on top of the mantle, but before she could throw it into the flames, Pansy interrupted them, stepping demurely through the door on the other side of the room. "You're going to the Ministry, Mother, Father?" Her voice lilted into surprise on the second name, but by the time Hawthorn turned and looked at her, she had hidden it. Hawthorn smiled. Her daughter was well-trained, and knew all the pureblood courtesies. What some of Hawthorn's friends had called her "unusual upbringing" had added to Pansy's life and not taken away from it.

"Yes, my darling," she said, putting out a hand. Pansy came and immediately stood with her cheek next to it, not touching it. Hawthorn leaned nearer and took a deep sniff. One of the few pleasures that came with her werewolf curse was learning to smell others—both their added scents, and what they smelled like underneath. Pansy was perfume and rich, strong flesh. "There's been an incident with the Minister and Harry Potter. We may be gone some time."

Pansy nodded solemnly, but did not ask to join them. She was her mother's blood heir, but not her magical one, and formal political meetings with allies were restricted to magical ones, the more important kind. "Of course, Mother. I shall have the house elves prepare something for me."

"Not cheese," said Hawthorn at once, recognizing the look in her daughter's eyes. "It made your stomach upset the last time."

Pansy sighed, but dipped her head, murmured, "Of course, Mother," a second time, and vanished in the direction of the kitchens.

Hawthorn cast the powder into the flames, calling out, “Gringotts Fourth!” When the flames flared green, she wrapped her arms around Dragonsbane—he could not say the destination aloud and so would have to Floo along with her—and stepped into the fire.

Their destination was relatively far away, but Hawthorn had always enjoyed Flooing—the rush through the darkness, the excuse to get slightly dirty because no one would expect otherwise, the stumble at the end as the other fireplace spat them out. The speed of werewolf legs was the only thing she had found that was faster, since she didn’t trust herself on a broom.

She and Dragonsbane came out in a richly appointed chamber, the walls red and gold. Hawthorn curled her lip slightly. The goblins made it a point to have red and gold everywhere, the colors of Gryffindor. It was a subtle statement back to Salazar Slytherin, who had tricked them into a bargain long ago, to favor the colors he despised. Hawthorn thought that a thousand years was quite enough time to get over an insult, however, and did not understand why the goblins kept doing it.

“Hello, Hawthorn.”

Hawthorn turned and nodded to Elfrida Bulstrode, who was waiting for them, her hands clasped at her waist, her head bent down, her eyes on the floor, her voice quiet and gentle. Elfrida had been trained as one of the traditional puellaris witches, the maidenly and gentle ones, who were nothing but calm and gracious in public. They saved their ferocity for arguments in private, and for defense of their children; they were rumored to be able to turn into lionesses if someone harmed their sons and daughters. Hawthorn had never seen that happen, and hoped she never would, since she never planned to harm a Bulstrode child.

This time, though, there was something more to Elfrida than her traditional mannerisms. Hawthorn sniffed, and then sniffed again. Most women had a faint undertone of blood to their scents at all times, signaling where they would bleed from their wombs, even if they weren’t menstruating right then. But Elfrida’s scent was empty of blood, and had been for some time.

That meant only one thing.

“Congratulations, my dear,” said Hawthorn warmly, reaching out to grip the other witch’s hand. “How far along are you?”

Elfrida looked cautiously up from the floor, and when she found the permission to meet Hawthorn’s gaze in her smile, she smiled back. “Three months along,” she said. “I’ve dreamed. Adalrico and I are going to have another daughter.”

Hawthorn inclined her head. “Congratulations,” she repeated.

“Indeed,” said a voice at Elfrida’s shoulder, and Adalrico Bulstrode stalked in through another door, his formal negotiations cloak swirling behind him. Millicent, as both his blood daughter and his magical heir, followed close at his heels. “We are proud beyond proud.” He moved up to his wife, seized her in his arms, and kissed her firmly, which Elfrida yielded to with her usual grace. Millicent moved around her parents, with a slightly amused glance at them, and bowed. She never curtsied, knowing, as any woman would, Hawthorn thought, that it only made her look ridiculous. She wore formal robes, too, not the gown that Hawthorn and her mother did.

“Mrs. Parkinson,” said Millicent, her voice polished and polite. “I trust that you have dealt well with the Dark gift that you received last August?”

“With help,” said Hawthorn, “I have indeed.” She admired Millicent for a moment. Pansy had other strengths, but this girl was a perfect Slytherin snake, tall for her age, with a mind obviously able to tie itself into knots behind her calm face. And unafraid, too, which would serve her well in politics. “Now I am going to repay one source of that help.”

“What happened, exactly?” Millicent asked. “I came in on the tail end of my parents’ conversation.”

“Harry Potter was taken captive by two gray-cloaked wizards who called themselves Hounds and claimed to be working for the Ministry,” said Lucius Malfoy, as he came in through another door.

Behind him was Narcissa, who met Hawthorn's eyes and nodded to her, and his son Draco, who looked half-distracted. "And we have just received another communication from Severus Snape, who is acting as his guardian. The boy has been found, but Professor Snape believes it best if we are all there to hear what happened. It concerns us, as his formal allies."

Hawthorn flicked up a brow. The day that Lucius Malfoy allies with someone on formal terms and means it is the day that I am freed of this curse. She considered Lucius a good politician, but too likely to keep playing both sides until he could no longer do so, always looking more for his own advantage than his allies'. His wife was worth ten of him, being able to actually risk her life and ideals for her ideals.

Her gaze went to Draco. The boy was Lucius's blood heir, but not yet his magical one. Of course, Lucius had insisted his son was young yet, and the talent had time to manifest.

Save that Millicent manifested when she was six, and even others younger than fourteen, I might believe that.

Hawthorn shook herself free of her preoccupation when she realized that Elfrida was announcing how they would reach the Ministry. She had to keep her mind focused on the meeting and its purpose, which was Potter and finding out how deeply this corruption in the Ministry had gone. Being Potter's formal ally was more than a convenience, and had been ever since he had given her the first vials of Wolfsbane Potion.

"The goblins keep a series of carts that travel to the Ministry," Elfrida was explaining. "They'll let me take one to the Fourth Level of the Ministry, and from there it's only a short walk to the Head Auror's office, where Professor Snape has told Mr. Malfoy that he and his charge are waiting for us."

She glanced around the room, blushing when she met the men's eyes, to see if anyone would object to that plan. No one did. Adalrico put an arm around his wife's waist and steered her towards the door he and Millicent had come in by, murmuring in her ear.

Hawthorn followed, her head up and her mind working. She didn't know what Potter's abduction meant, of course, and wouldn't until she reached the Ministry. In the meantime, she had to consider the Malfoys.

Why has Lucius bothered to come? His wife I can see, certainly, since she has risked so much to help Potter. His son, since Pansy told me that he's nigh-obsessed with the Potter boy. But what does Lucius think he can gain by attending the meeting himself?

Unless this matter is much deeper than just a simple abduction, perhaps.

Hawthorn smiled slightly, feeling a curl of pleasure uncoil and stretch in her gut. She loved politics, as long as they didn't happen the day after a full moon, and this time she'd had a few days to recover.

Millicent stepped out of the simple cart, which an enormous lizard had pulled for them, onto the wooden platform, and examined the door in front of her. It was made of steel, as though the wizards in the Ministry feared the goblins breaking through. Of course, they might, for all Millicent knew. Though she had not learned much from Binns, she had read enough books on her own to know that goblin rebellions were a large theme of wizarding history.

She glanced back, and watched her father helping her mother out of the cart. Millicent rolled her eyes. She was happy that her parents were going to have another child, of course, and she understood why her father was so proud and so anxious about it, but Elfrida ought to have been able to step out of a damn cart on her own. Not for the first time, Millicent was grateful that she hadn't been given the puellaris training. Shapeshifting was not worth giving up her mind and her freedom.

The door opened as she watched, and the Auror waiting beyond it nodded to them with awe-inspiring composure, given that she was confronting eight Dark wizards, one of them a necromancer. "My name is Auror Mallory," she said. "If you will accompany me to the second floor?"

Millicent looked around several times as Auror Mallory led them to the lifts, but saw nothing especially interesting—just desks piled with forms. Of course, if those forms were covered with laws that controlled magical creatures, she could imagine their power. But it wasn't interesting or exciting or flashy power.

Perhaps it is worth looking into anyway.

Millicent decided to remember that for later. She knew almost nothing about how the Ministry functioned on a day-to-day level; her history lessons had focused on the Wizengamot and the grand process of trials for Dark wizards. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to study the smaller things, the nitpicky details that escaped all but the most discerning eyes.

Millicent had found many useful things that way. If nothing else, it was how she had first discovered the level of Potter's power.

They reached the second floor at last, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Millicent saw more to be proud of here, since she recognized the faint tingle of complicated wards about most of the desks. She studied them with a critical eye. Most were wanting compared to the wards of Blackstone, her home, but she could see the attraction of them for Light wizards. After all, they would never have to say that they were using magic so powerful that they were tempted to fall into corruption because of it. The most magic of this level could inspire someone to do was steal someone else's treacle tart.

They reached Rufus Scrimgeour's office, and crowded inside. Millicent studied the ring of chairs first. There were ten, enough, she supposed, for the eight of them, Harry, and Professor Snape. But when she lifted her gaze, she saw an elderly man she supposed must be the head of the Auror Office standing against a desk.

Is Harry not here?

Not in front of them, but behind them, she realized a moment later, as the familiar brewing-storm smell struck her nose. She turned her

head, and saw Harry step into the room, his face pale but composed. Behind him came Professor Snape. His face was also pale, but nothing like composed. Millicent shivered. She would not have wanted to be in a Potions class with his eyes flashing that dark fury.

“Greetings, Malfoy, Parkinson, Bulstrode,” said Auror Scrimgeour, his voice reflecting only a very faint distaste. He had greeted them by family names, as was proper, Millicent thought, looking back at him. “I have agreed to use my office as a place to host a formal alliance meeting between your families and Harry Potter, because Mr. Potter was attacked by Ministry officials working for the Minister himself, and I would like to know what happened as much as you did.”

“But surely you must have the details by now, Auror Scrimgeour?” That was her mother, Millicent knew, her voice soft and retiring. All right, that was one good thing about the puellaris training; it encouraged other witches, and especially wizards, to underestimate Elfrida.

Auror Scrimgeour seemed to be no exception. His eyes softened as he looked at her mother. “I do not, Mrs. Bulstrode. Mr. Potter promised to explain everything when we were all assembled.”

Where is Harry? Millicent thought abruptly, craning her neck. He should have made it up to the front of the room by now.

Or, no, wait, of course he had not. He was in the middle of the chairs instead, being hugged to death by Draco. Millicent’s eyebrows rose as she studied the scene. It did have a single difference from a scene of the same kind she might have observed in the Slytherin common room. Harry’s arms were clasped around Draco’s neck and back, and hugging him as firmly as Draco usually embraced him.

“If Mr. Potter would like to start explaining?” the Auror asked, his voice now equally faint in amusement.

Harry simply turned, adjusting the placement of his arm so that it draped around one of Draco’s shoulders instead of both, and led him up to the front of the room. He placed him in the chair underneath photographs of what looked like Aurors capturing criminals, squeezed

his hand once, and stepped away. Draco, who already looked calmer than he had when he met them underneath Gringotts, nodded at him, then watched as Harry took his place in the very center of the circle of chairs.

Standing up, Millicent thought, as she sat down between her parents. The Parkinsons took the chairs next to them, Lucius and Narcissa the seats next to their son, and Snape and Scrimgeour the ones on the other side of Draco. He wants to present this to us in full-on formal terms, then.

Millicent leaned forward, more eager to hear what it was than ever now, especially as she noticed the faint green tinge to Harry's cheeks, and the slight staring quality of his eyes whenever they rested on anyone's face but Draco's or Snape's.

Harry told himself he was calm as he and Snape approached Scrimgeour's office. He had to be. He had just worked with Rita Skeeter to hammer out the final form of the article that she would release tomorrow in the Daily Prophet, and then Snape had found and fetched him. Harry had promised to explain everything when his allies arrived, and Snape had agreed. No one was forcing him or pressuring him, and he would strike the first blow when the article went into print. Meanwhile, it was only common courtesy to inform his allies and his guardian and his best friend of what would be in the article beforehand.

Of course, all of that was only so much confectionary sugar on the ugly truth. He was nervous because of what his allies would say about his Dark magic and the breaking of his word to the Minister, and because of what would follow if they did not reject him and Harry essentially began a war on Fudge.

There is a storm coming, either way, Harry thought as he stepped into the office and found it full of people, and I must be at the heart of it.

His eyes skimmed past the Parkinsons, the Bulstrodes, and the elder Malfoys, and came to rest on Draco. He could see his best friend's tense face melting into lines of relaxation and relief as he saw Harry.

He probably would have moved forward in a moment to take Harry in a hug.

Harry forestalled that by moving first.

The expression of surprise on Draco's face was priceless, but far better was the tightness of the embrace Harry received as he tightened his arms around Draco's shoulders and buried his head in the curve of his neck. A tension he hadn't realized was there melted away. Yes, there was some concern that his allies might reject him, but at least one person wouldn't. There were two if one counted Snape, of course, but Harry had a different kind of comfort embracing Draco than he did when embracing Snape.

Draco hugged him back, fierce with delight and relief, and Harry wanted to go on standing there. But needs must, and he pulled away after too short a time and led Draco to the front of the room, placing him in a chair with the promise, given via a squeeze of his hand, that he wouldn't be far away.

Then he turned around and met his allies' gazes, one by one.

Scrimgeour was waiting. Snape was tense. Narcissa had a calm expression on her face, as if she could readily accept and forgive whatever crime Harry had to confess. Lucius was utterly blank. Harry could not see Dragonsbane's face under his hood, and was surprised that the necromancer had come at all. Hawthorn leaned forward in her chair, as though she would spring and rend the words from Harry before long. The pale woman whom Harry vaguely remembered as Millicent's mother looked caught between fear and resignation. Millicent herself had a faint, amused smile on her face that her father's matched.

Harry nodded. Well, come tomorrow, everyone would know a part of the truth, anyway. Perhaps this could serve as practice for the wider publicity that Harry knew he would eventually receive.

"I broke one of the Ministry's laws without knowing it today," he said. "I spoke Parseltongue in Knockturn Alley, because some South African hive cobras escaped their confinement and I was afraid they

would hurt others. I convinced them to come to the Forbidden Forest with me, where I set them free. Then the Hounds, gray-cloaked wizards saying they worked for the Ministry, came to and abducted me.”

That part had been the easy one, Harry found, as his throat seized up. That part Snape had seen, and told other people. Now he needed to report what, so far, no one but those who had been in the interrogation rooms knew. He struggled to breathe.

Hawthorn unwittingly—or perhaps she did have some inkling, given that she could smell his emotions—helped him over the hard part. “How dare they take a child without his guardian?” she said, and her voice had a trace of a growl in it.

Harry blinked, then smiled at her without humor. “I don’t think the Minister concerned himself that much with legalities, Mrs. Parkinson. I found out soon enough that he took me because he was afraid of my magic. He thought he had a Dark Lord in the making. I don’t believe I was a child in his eyes any longer.”

“He should never have done it,” said Scrimgeour from his corner of the room, “regardless.”

Harry chanced a look at the Head Auror. Scrimgeour sat very still, and his yellow eyes were so intent that Harry felt naked. He had to look away, down at the floor, and started pacing as he resumed his tale.

“The Hounds explained their purpose to me while we waited for the Minister.” Breathe, breathe, and it will not be so hard. “They used to be Aurors, some of them, and others were spies and messengers for Voldemort. The Minister was using their connection to the Dark to seek out other Dark wizards. They wear collars that keep their thoughts from all Dark influences—“

Including ones that aren’t that Dark, said Regulus’s voice abruptly in his thoughts.

Where were you? Harry asked, losing the forward momentum of his conversation for a moment. I thought you'd gone missing.

I was testing the Hounds' collars, Regulus said, his voice resigned. There really is no way past them, at least not that I can find. Usually, I can pass from mind to mind that has a connection to Voldemort along a sort of tunnel, but this tunnel's collapsed and had rock shoved into it.

Then perhaps they didn't have a connection to Voldemort.

I think they did.

Harry shook his head, and realized his allies were still looking at him. He sighed and focused on them again. "I'm sorry," he said. "Choosing how best to arrange this experience in words has not been easy."

"Why not?" Adalrico asked, his voice low and dangerous. "What about it was so hard, Harry?"

Harry looked into Mr. Bulstrode's eyes. This was easier. He looked as if he were all ferocity, considering how this news would affect his family. Harry could deal with that better than more personal concern right now. "I found out that the Hounds are Fudge's special police," he said. "His secret police. He's been using them to track and arrest Dark wizards, at least one other before me. And he's shoved edicts through the Wizengamot about the registration of Dark wizards that the full Wizengamot didn't vote for, given the clause that allows the Minister to take control of the Ministry in times of war."

"We're not at war," said Scrimgeour crisply. "And according to Section Two of the Ministry Laws, he has to announce that we are before he can start taking such privileges as the creation of a force of war wizards."

Harry blinked. He hadn't known that. "Oh," he said intelligently.

"And then what happened, Harry?" It was Narcissa who asked, voice warm and motherly and caring. Harry focused on her face, this time. He would pretend that she was the only one in the room, and he was

talking only to her, he decided. It was the best way to get through this next part.

“The Hounds brought me to the Minister when I announced that I wasn’t going to stop using Parseltongue,” he said. “He told me that I was indisputably a Dark Lord, and I was the main target of the new laws.”

Shock bloomed on Narcissa’s face, and presumably on other faces around him. Harry grimaced and kept his eyes focused forward. “I tried to argue with him, and say that I was loyal to the government of the wizarding world and didn’t intend to take it over. He didn’t listen. In the end, he brought out a silver sphere that would prove my loyalty, if I really had. I put my hands on it, and I did feel magic running through my body. I couldn’t tell what it did, at first.”

He sighed. He would say this without frill, without decoration, he decided. Dressing it up would not make it different from what it was, anyway. “The sphere wasn’t to prove my loyalty. It tried to drain my magic, to make me into a Squib.”

“What?”

The combined cry came from many throats around him, but the one Harry noticed the most was Snape’s, because he had yet to hear his guardian raise his voice. He turned to face Snape, and winced when he found him on his feet, one hand clasped around the wand he didn’t seem aware he’d drawn. “Sir,” he said quietly, “please sit down.”

Snape stayed on his feet. “Why did you not tell us this at once?” he said, in a flat voice that Harry knew covered a rage fit to make him commit murder.

“Because,” said Harry, “of what happened next. I broke free of the sphere before it could drain my magic, and put a body-bind on the Hounds. Then I turned to face the Minister, trying to negotiate my way out of this still, and Dolores Umbridge, the Minister’s Special Assistant, hit me in the back with a spell of some kind. It felt like a small, concentrated Cruciatus—“

"How do you know what that feels like, Mr. Potter?" asked Scrimgeour then.

Harry shot him an annoyed glance. Must he really ask that question right now? "Because I've felt it several times," he said. "From Voldemort and from Death Eaters, both."

He saw Millicent's mother put a hand to her mouth, tears forming in her eyes, but he didn't have time to figure out why. He had to continue before Snape could do something stupid like insist on checking his back for injury right in front of everyone. Besides, this was the moment when he would find out whether or not his allies would abandon him.

"I let my magic go," he said quietly. "I created a snake of Dark magic and sent it to fill Umbridge with cold poison that cost her control of her left side. Meanwhile, I coiled a snake around the Minister's neck that threatened to strangle him if he did anything I didn't like."

He closed his eyes and stood still. There was utter silence around him for right now. He didn't know what would happen, what the first reaction would be, and as moment after moment passed without one, he felt his muscles tighten, his teeth grind, his fingers fold into tense blooms of pain in his hands.

Then someone snickered.

Harry blinked and opened his eyes. Millicent had her hand over her mouth, and her brown eyes sparkled merrily at him above her palm.

"Wish I'd been there to see that, Harry," she drawled, as she took her hand away. "Merlin! The Minister of Magic, confronted and outdone by a fourteen-year-old boy."

Harry frowned at her. Once again, it was easier to concentrate on one person at a time, so he didn't look at the others. "Didn't you hear a word I said, Millicent? I said that I created snakes out of Dark magic."

“And didn’t you hear that my family’s a Dark one?” Millicent gave a lazy flap of her hand. “I can see how it might have escaped you, since after all we didn’t attend Walpurgis Night and I wasn’t Sorted into Slytherin.” Her voice, heavy with sarcasm, rubbed his nerves all the wrong ways.

“Regardless—“ Harry began.

“What happened next?”

Harry was actually grateful to turn and face Hawthorn, since Millicent was puzzling the fuck out of him. “I explained to the Minister where I stood,” he said. “Then I reversed the damage to Umbridge. But it was too late. I had already discovered that I had enjoyed causing her pain.”

He rubbed a hand along his robes, holding Hawthorn’s eyes, which were calm and encouraging. “I made a bargain with Fudge. I would tell no one what had happened there, in return for his ceasing at once to use the Hounds, pass those ridiculous laws, or steal anyone else’s magic.”

“That was stupid,” said Scrimgeour. “You had no right. We have a right to know what is happening in the Ministry, Harry.”

Harry eyed the Auror sideways. “Why do you think I’m telling you now? Something happened to make me break the bargain. Rita Skeeter somehow saw everything, I don’t know how, and told me that she was going to publish the story. I had a chance to cooperate with her, or not. I chose the cooperation. The story’s coming out tomorrow in the Daily Prophet, minus some details that I thought only my allies needed to hear.”

There was a faint murmur of noise at that. Harry knew what it meant. They were struck that he had trusted them, or been honest with them; Harry himself was not sure which one it would be better categorized as.

“So.” He let his eyes track, one more time, around the circle of faces, playing with too many emotions to let him know for sure what would

happen next. "There you have it. I used Dark magic to torture someone, and I broke my promise to someone who would have been an ally. Let that factor into your decision. If any of you want to dissolve your formal alliances with me, I would understand."

Hawthorn stood up.

Harry looked at her and swallowed. He had hoped she wouldn't want to dissolve the alliance, but he had no right to gainsay her if she did. He started to roll his sleeve up, so he could reach the scar that was the mark of their binding.

Hawthorn knelt by him in a rush, reaching out to embrace him. Harry stared at her. What is she doing?

"I was a Death Eater," Hawthorn whispered, for his ears alone. "I am a Dark witch. I am—something else that you know well enough, Harry. Did you really think that I or my family would abandon you?"

Harry sighed. "I didn't know. Mrs. Parkinson. And I don't know if you should trust me—"

"We do not plan to abduct you, steal your magic, or force you into bargains that would not have held in any case," said Hawthorn dryly. "Be content with what is, Harry. We stand at your side."

"My family does, as well," Adalrico announced, abruptly looming beyond Hawthorn's right shoulder. "You have proved that you are not intolerably of the Light, Mr. Potter. You will use Dark magic to defend yourself, and that means that you would not condemn us for using it to defend ourselves." He smiled, his teeth flashing in that same fierce expression Harry had seen in his eyes. "We stand at your side."

Harry turned slowly and looked at the Malfoys. Narcissa smiled at him, nothing but gentleness in the expression.

"I have put much work into dancing the pavane and the waltz and others, all for your sake, Harry," she said. "I would not give that up. My muscles ache right now, but my feet will be lighter because of the realization you have come to today."

Harry stared at Lucius. Lucius simply laughed softly, his eyes feral.

"I do not begin truce-dances only to stop them two steps from the end," he said. "And the Minister is a much more satisfying opponent than any you have showed me so far, Potter. I accept both the offer to continue the alliance and the opportunity to avenge myself on Cornelius for the insults he has dealt me."

Harry simply met Snape and Draco's eyes. He knew he did not have to ask about the continuation of their bonds with him. They would not abandon him.

He looked at Scrimgeour.

The Auror looked back. His yellow eyes and his lion-like mane of hair made him seem formidable even sitting down. Then he shook his head from side to side, as though waking from a dream.

"I have always known that the Ministry was not what I hoped," he mused. "I have always put up with that, and encouraged the good and discouraged the bad where I found it, and enjoyed my paperwork.

"Now I find that the Ministry is much further from what I am willing to put up with than I ever knew. A Minister who would seize wartime privileges when it is not a time of war and kidnap children who have saved lives and try to steal any wizard's magic is not one I want to follow, and not one worth keeping bargains with." Scrimgeour planted his bad leg firmly on the floor and nodded. "If nothing else, I shall enjoy seeing what shit bobs to the surface in the wake of your storm, Mr. Potter, so that I might pluck it out of the water."

Harry closed his eyes. Then he murmured, "Thank you for listening to me, everyone. I suppose we should go back to Hogwarts?"

"I'm coming with you."

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at Draco. "I know."

Draco knew that Professor Snape was giving him a disapproving glance. His mother was smiling. His father would reflect a faint

tension in the lines around his jaw at the thought of Draco not even asking his permission.

Draco did not care.

He had been able to sit so silently during the meeting because he had been wrestling with the realization that had dawned on him like a personal sunrise when Harry had entered the room and come over to hug him before he did anything else.

He loved Harry, yes, and he had known that for over a year. But this time was the first he had realized that that love was not entirely that of a friend, or even a brother, which was the second comparison that came to mind.

Well, he thought, when the initial shock had passed. That isn't entirely surprising. I can live with it pretty damn easily.

He watched Harry throughout the meeting, the way he spoke the words, the way he forced himself on through confessions that Draco knew would be difficult for him, the way he accepted, with a slightly stunned expression, the offers of the pureblood families to continue their alliances. He contented himself all the while with the fact that only he really knew how hard this was for Harry. He knew Harry better than Professor Snape, better than anyone else would ever know him.

And of course it was only natural that Harry would accept his presence with equanimity, even a smile, the first genuine one he'd given since entering this meeting.

Draco didn't care that his parents hadn't given him permission to go, or that Professor Snape hadn't properly invited him. He was going back to Hogwarts a day early, because he wanted to, and Harry wanted him to. Draco couldn't imagine a pair of better reasons in the world.

Hawthorn raised her eyebrows as she watched the glances exchanged between the Potter boy and the Malfoy heir. So. Pansy was right. Well, that alliance will be a benefit to all of us, I think. At

least we're unlikely to lose Potter to some Light wizarding family that might convince him to become a Light Lord.

She could feel her own heart pounding harder and harder, much as it did when the full moon rose and the transformation began. The future lay before her, much more exciting than it had been only this morning. By tomorrow, Skeeter's article would be out, and while Hawthorn knew it would not contain as much detail as Potter had given them today, it would be an attack on the Minister. Fudge might be pried from his incompetent perch at last.

And then the wizarding world would go into political chaos—chaos that a forewarned, clever, politically savvy pureblood could certainly exploit to her own betterment and her family's.

And for the benefit of allies, as well, Hawthorn thought, gaze turning back to Potter. He sang with power, radiated it, rang with it. She always forgot, when she had been away from him for a time, how strong it was. And if Narcissa is right, we shall have something much better than a Lord, something we have never had before, something entirely new.

It was all she could do not to howl.

The future was near, and it had never looked better.

Interlude: Minister Illegally Kidnaps Child

The Daily Prophet

September 1st, 1994

MINISTER ILLEGALLY KIDNAPS CHILD

Brother of Boy-Who-Lived Abducted By Minister Fudge

By: Rita Skeeter

At approximately 1:30 in the afternoon yesterday, a pair of wizards working for Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge abducted Harry Potter, 14, the elder twin brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, from the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"They called themselves Hounds," said Potter. "They'd even named themselves after dogs. Grim was one, and Crup was the other."

He said that he'd been afraid when this reporter caught up with him yesterday.

"I didn't recognize either one of them," said the teen, who celebrated his birthday and his brother's only a month before his abduction. "But I think I could point them out again if I had to."

Potter described being brought to a blank interrogation room, where the Hounds explained their purpose to him. Essentially, it appears that the Minister of Magic has been granting the authority of a secret police to these Hounds, and that they are authorized to hunt down Dark wizards who have broken the new laws calling for Dark wizard registration.

As was widely reported last year by this very newspaper, Harry Potter is in possession of the rare Dark talent Parseltongue, which he used yesterday in Knockturn Alley to contain a quiver of deadly South African hive cobras.

“I’d had to register myself as a Parselmouth a few days before,” explains Potter. The registration included a requirement that he stop using Parseltongue. Potter refused to sign this form on the grounds that it did not grant him equality under the law—no other registration requires that the Dark wizard in question stop using his or her talent—and left the Ministry.

It seems that the abduction was motivated by Potter’s use of Parseltongue in Knockturn Alley.

“I spoke with the Minister,” said Potter. “He told me that my situation was different because I might become a Dark Lord. I asked him why, and he said that because I’m a Parselmouth, I’m linked to You-Know-Who. Then he told me that he would give me a chance to prove my loyalty to the government of wizarding Britain.”

Potter said that he was eager to take the chance, as he was bewildered and hurt by the Minister’s accusations.

“I mean, I know that people are afraid of me because I’m a Parselmouth,” said the fourteen-year-old, who is currently under the legal guardianship of Professor Severus Snape, who was not permitted to accompany him to the Ministry. “I just didn’t expect that it would take any form this extreme. I thought I’d have a chance to go on trial in front of the whole wizarding world and answer the accusations against me fairly. I trust the Wizengamot. I’m sure they would come to the right decision.”

The “test,” described by Potter as Minister Fudge’s replacement for Azkaban now that no Dementors attend the island, was a large silver sphere with holes in it, sitting on a tripod about three feet off the floor.

“Madam Umbridge told me that I would just have to put my hands on the sphere, and I would be given the chance to show my loyalty,” said Potter. Madam Dolores Umbridge is the Special Assistant to Minister Fudge, who has overseen many of the new Dark wizard registration laws.

When Potter put his hands on the sphere, nothing happened at first. He said he could feel magic moving through him and binding his

fingers in place, but as long as nothing hurt him, he trusted Minister Fudge and Madam Umbridge to do right by him.

“I knew I’d been brought there without my guardian, and rather suddenly, but I just couldn’t believe they would really hurt me,” he said.

The sphere, however, apparently tried to drain Potter of his magic. As Harry Potter is currently the most powerful young wizard at Hogwarts—second only to the great Albus Dumbledore, if we may take his explosion of magic on the Quidditch Pitch last November as sufficient testimony—this was quite painful for him.

“I drove the sphere’s magic off and broke the sphere in so doing,” said Potter. “That wasn’t my intention. I think I frightened the Minister and Madam Umbridge with that, if they weren’t already frightened before.”

The Hounds tried to attack Potter at this point, but he says that he imprisoned them with Petrificus Totalus. “I didn’t want to hurt them,” he explains.

Minister Fudge stood in front of Potter, and Madam Umbridge behind. At this point, Madam Umbridge cast what was later identified, from the wound on Potter’s back, as the Lamina Alba hex, last made famous when Bartemius Crouch authorized the Aurors to use it on Dark wizards during the War with You-Know-Who.

“I didn’t know what it was,” Potter admitted. “I just knew that it hurt like a small, concentrated dose of Cruciatus.” Potter has experienced the Unforgivable Curse several times now, mostly at the hands of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban in March and have so far eluded the Ministry’s Aurors.

The sudden pain and the fear and anger that Potter himself was feeling inspired him with a desire to strike back. He turned and loosed some of his magic in the form of a snake at Madam Umbridge. “Since I’m a Parselmouth, the snake form just seems to come naturally to me,” he said.

The snake paralyzed Madam Umbridge with several cold bites, while a second snake kept Minister Fudge from interfering.

“It was over in five minutes,” said Potter. “Then I reversed the damage. Madam Umbridge can walk again. I would be sorry if she couldn’t. I don’t know why I did that. I was on overload, I think. I’d gone through an abduction, an interrogation, and the sphere in one day. I’m sorry.” He shuddered when he spoke with this reporter. “And then I’d had to confront being called a Dark Lord. But that’s no excuse for acting like one.”

Potter was later rescued by the Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour, and the arrival of his guardian, Professor Severus Snape.

Potter said that he didn’t particularly want the attention that he knew would follow from this article, but that he felt a duty, however reluctant, to inform the wizarding world of the truth.

“I just don’t think that one boy can handle this alone,” he told the Prophet. “I might be magically powerful, but there’s a lot I don’t know, and I don’t trust myself to make the best decision, so I should submit to the judgment of my elders. The public should know, so they can make up their own minds.”

Sources that asked to remain anonymous have confirmed many parts of Potter’s story, including the removal of a large silver sphere that can drain magic and matches Potter’s description of the device used on him from the estates of Starrise, a powerful Light wizarding family, several weeks ago, and Potter’s abduction by two former Aurors, Gamaliel Gorgon and Falstaff Morologus, who were sacked for gross negligence of their duties.

Minister Fudge and Madam Umbridge have so far been unavailable for comment.

“I hope they speak up soon,” said Potter. “I would love to know their justifications for what they did.

“I just hope they have a reason good enough to justify abducting a fourteen-year-old from his guardian. But I’m sure they do. After all,

Minister Fudge is the Minister of Magic, and ultimately accountable to the whole of wizarding Britain, not just one young wizard.”

Chapter Eleven: Stung Into Storm

Harry sighed and sat back, flexing his hand slowly open. It hurt from the long time he'd spent gripping the quill, more so than the time he'd spent writing. He'd had to think for long minutes before he discovered the perfect things to say to James, Connor, and Remus. Each letter had to be different, just long enough to convey that he was all right without worrying them with too much detail, and informed by the knowledge of being mostly apart from them for a month.

Connor can keep this part of leadership, Harry thought, as he sealed the last letter and turned to look apprehensively at Hedwig. Hedwig cocked her head and hooted indignantly, as much to say that she could too carry three letters to the same place, and Harry had been a fool to doubt her.

"Sorry, girl," Harry whispered, his hand smoothing down the feathers of her chest. "Nerves, I guess."

He found twine in the drawer of the table beside his bed, and used it to bind the three letters strongly to Hedwig's leg. He made sure the name on each envelope was clearly visible, then nodded and sighed and told her, "Lux Aeterna, girl. James, Connor, Remus."

Hedwig flipped her wings open and took off, shining in the dim light of the dungeons. Harry heard a brief hooting squabble before Snape opened his door for her. He closed his eyes and pictured her skimming up through the dungeons, heading for the Owlery.

"Harry."

Harry let out another sigh. The departure of Hedwig meant that he had finished his letters, and so the time that Snape and Draco had agreed to let him spend alone was over. He glanced towards the door, and found Snape already standing there. "Yes, sir?" he asked.

"We have things to speak of." Snape sounded as certain as he had been the day he told Harry he was staying at Hogwarts for the rest of the summer, but this time, there was no happiness or amusement in his voice. It sounded dry, purged to dust.

Harry nodded, and looked past Snape to see if Draco was there. Draco slipped around the professor a moment later, and made a zigzag line for the desk where Harry sat. Harry stood up and hugged him one-armed. He'd sat for long enough on the hard chair, and figured he should at least be able to sit in comfort for the discussion that was coming.

He sat down on the bed, with Draco beside him. He looked up to meet Snape's raised eyebrows, but they went down again in a moment, cutting off any hope of a reprieve.

"You were once again in danger today," Snape noted.

Harry shook his head slightly. "I am always in danger," he said. "I think that the sooner you learn that, the better."

Snape ignored him. "It was danger that could have been prevented in one respect, Harry. I think it is time that you learned to resist someone trying to Apparate with you. It would not have stopped everything that happened, perhaps, including exposure of the Minister's corruption, but at least you would have been able to remain free and out of the Hound's grasp."

Harry blinked. "I didn't know that resisting Side Along Apparition was possible, sir."

"Of course it is, for a skilled Occlumens," said Snape, waving one hand as though Harry should have known that already. "You will have noticed that Side Along Apparition is different from doing it on your own—that the sensations are more dizzying, for example."

Harry nodded, and moved closer to Draco when his friend tugged with one arm. Harry relaxed when he felt the warmth seeping in from his side. "I always feel more likely to be sick after a Side Along Apparition," he said.

"That is because the space through which wizards Apparate influences one's mind when one is not in control of the spell," Snape said, falling into lecture mode. "Such perceptions can be manipulated.

Just as an Occlumens can refuse to let a Legilimens enter his mind around his shields, he can refuse to let those perceptions do the same thing, and thus resist being pulled along.”

Harry half-closed his eyes. “So I’m resisting the spell or the person casting it, sir?”

“Both,” said Snape. “Now. I want you to concentrate on that, practicing it, when next you feel up to it.” He nodded curtly to Draco. “Come, Draco.”

Draco blinked. “What--?”

“We should let Harry sleep.”

Harry frowned at Snape. “It’s only nine,” he said. “I’ll be able to stay awake for at least a little longer.”

Snape simply waited, and a moment later, Harry’s jaws cracked under a yawn. Harry sighed. “Yeah, all right,” he said, and shoved regretfully at Draco’s shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

Draco touched his forehead for a moment, as though checking for fever, and then nodded at him. “See you tomorrow, Harry. I’m so glad you’re alive.”

The last was a soft murmur, and before Harry could react properly, both Snape and Draco had left, Snape shutting the door firmly behind them. Harry stretched his arms and went to prepare for bed. At least tomorrow was the day the students arrived at Hogwarts, not the actual first day of school. That gave him some time to prepare.

And it’s the day Skeeter’s article comes out.

Harry’s mouth twitched into a small smile. I thought time to prepare, not time to relax.

I have no idea why Snape had to tell you to go to bed, said Regulus abruptly. You’re half-collapsing already. Go to sleep, and stop thinking ridiculous things like this.

Yes, Father, Harry said with sarcasm that not even Regulus could miss. He wouldn't call Regulus's nagging like a mother's, since that still brought up a bit too much pain.

Snape kept most of his attention tuned to the passive link between him and Harry as Draco, hardly needing the encouragement, chatted about the parts of his summer he'd spent with Harry at Lux Aeterna. He was in the middle of reliving a broom chase when Harry relaxed in Snape's mind, and he felt him lapse into sleep.

"Draco," said Snape, interrupting Draco mid-sentence and winning a glare for that. "I've been meaning to talk to you about something for a while now, something concerning you and Harry." Never mind that he had only noticed properly that day. Draco would believe in him more if he thought that Snape thought this was an ongoing problem.

"What is it?" Draco stood up at once, his body all but vibrating with tension. "Has he said something about me? Did I hurt him in some way, something that he can't tell me about face-to-face?"

Snape shook his head slightly. Yet more signs of obsession. He does not even strike close to the real truth. "No, Draco," he said, and made his voice be gentle with an effort. "It is related to you more than it is to Harry. I have become concerned over the amount of time and thought that you spend on him. You seem to have almost no life of your own, outside of him."

Draco stared at him, then blinked lightly. "That's not true, Professor Snape," he said. "I spent lots of time at home this summer. I played Quidditch by myself and with some of the other boys from Slytherin—Blaise and Vince came over all the time. Not Gregory, though," he added, with a faint frown. "I studied history and pureblood rituals with my mother. I tried saying thank you to house elves, but Harry's wrong about that, it just makes them burst out in tears. Except Dobby, but he's strange anyway."

"Then why do you never speak about the time that you have spent playing Quidditch or studying history with others?" Snape inquired. "Why does every word out of your mouth concern Harry?"

Draco shrugged impatiently. "Because the time I spent around him was just more interesting."

Snape nodded once. "That is one of the signs of obsession, Draco. Even in a simple statement about what else you have done this summer, you cannot keep Harry out of it. I have seen the way you look at him—"

Draco's shoulders stiffened so fast that Snape was left wondering what he had done. Draco's voice was low and harsh. "And you disapprove? You're going to act like some crusty old wizarding parent telling me that your son can't possibly love whom he wants to because he has to continue the line?"

"What?" Snape asked blankly. Then his brain caught up with his ears, and he scrutinized Draco, narrow-eyed.

It is worse than I thought, he concluded after a moment. The boy has a crush, but he's convinced that this is some kind of grand passion for the ages.

"Listen to me, Draco," he said quietly, and the force of his tone, more than what he said, he thought, pulled Draco's eyes to his. "I do want to see Harry happy. That much is true. But I do not want to see you sacrifice your own happiness, your freedom, for his. Neither would he want that. He has had enough of sacrifices in his life. And as you stand now, you could sacrifice everything for one smile from him and think it justified. I will not let that happen. What will happen if he chooses to love elsewhere?"

Draco's expression turned into mulishness blended with something else, something genuinely frightening. "He won't," Draco said, his voice a low hiss. "I've always been here. There's no one else that he cares for as much as he cares for me. Besides, it'll probably be a while before he can love anyone else that much. He told me that last year, that he'd never thought of anything beyond the end of the war but continuing to serve his brother. But when he can look around and choose on his own, I'm going to be there."

“So you’ll wait until he notices you?” Snape asked, and shook his head when Draco nodded. “And you’re going to act like some lovesick young witch in Spain pining for her lost true love to come back from the wars?”

“I am not like that.” Draco was upset enough that Snape felt a stirring of power rise around him, promising a headache in a few moments. “You take that back. I do intend to win Harry’s love if I can.”

“You are thinking of permanence,” Snape said quietly. “You are too young for such things, Draco. You are fourteen.”

“You treat Harry like an adult.” Draco folded his arms and scowled.

“Because he acts like one,” said Snape, patience suddenly at an end. “Listen to me. I will watch you closely from now on. If you do not show some signs of independence by the end of September, then I will assure that you have it, whether you want it or not. Do you understand me?”

Draco just stared at him.

“I can assign detentions,” said Snape. “And that is only the beginning.”

“You don’t have the right to do this,” whispered Draco.

“And you don’t have the right to choose to smother yourself beneath the clinging blanket of some crush—“

“It is not a crush—“

“—simply because you wish to,” Snape finished. “I will not allow it, and Harry, if he notices, will not allow it.”

“I don’t want to tell him,” Draco spat, his face turning crimson. “I don’t want to tell him that his guardian’s being an unreasonable, stubborn old wanker.”

Snape raised an eyebrow and nodded once. "Very well. I will leave it up to you to tell him. You have until the end of October to do that."

"That's not fair—"

"Neither is what this crush might lead you to do, Draco, either to yourself or Harry," Snape cut him off. "Now, go get ready for bed."

Draco glared at him for a moment longer, but Snape had practiced, and received, much harsher glares than this young Malfoy was capable of. After a while, Draco went off to use the divan in Harry's room, muttering to himself under his breath.

Snape ground his teeth and moved off to create light wooden targets, so that he could take out the many frustrations of the day.

Why must I be the one to notice and take care of things that any reasonable parent should have noticed long since? Narcissa must have, though Lucius could be blind to such things. What did she think she was doing, encouraging the boy?

Albus finished reading the article on the front page of the Daily Prophet, and then put the paper down. His hands shook, very lightly. He did not allow himself to notice.

That's torn it.

For long moments, that was the only thought that would come to him. He sat in blankness of mind and stared out his window, past Fawkes's old perch. It was a magnificent day, brighter than it should be on the first of September, really, with the sun rising to embrace the sky. The children would be arriving that evening, and there were a thousand things to be done beforehand.

But, as well as being the Headmaster of the school, he was the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and those were the thoughts storming through his head, when they finally began to storm.

Harry cannot maintain peace. He cannot maintain a balance. He has already begun to change the wizarding world, and who knows when

he will stop? The Wizengamot may not have been contacted and told that Fudge intended to pass new laws or that we were in a state of war, but those are minor offenses, ones that would at least leave the government of wizarding Britain intact. It might even have worked in our favor, because the preparations would be in place when our true war with Tom begins. I was willing to let those happen, as long as the wider public did not notice.

Instead, Harry tips the balance, and now nothing will be the same again.

Albus closed his eyes. The mornings when he felt too old for politics were rare, but this had decided to be one of them. He could feel every ache in his joints, the faint stiffness in his back that not even long nights on a soft mattress could cure, the desire to simply sit back and hand off any important decisions to someone else. That last was an especially dangerous desire, because there was no one who could take up the decisions and confidently handle them.

Harry, his mind reminded him.

Never Harry, he answered firmly. He is probably going to be vates, I must admit, and he was the one who deflected Voldemort's Killing Curse. I can allow him no other role than that, not when his first political move in public is as disastrous as this one is. There were a thousand more graceful ways that he could have handled his abduction. Instead, he crashes through long years of elegant, hard work like a gorgon in a china shop.

I must distract him from participating in the larger political life of the wizarding world.

And Albus thought he knew the perfect distraction. He stood and turned to the chest behind his desk, which held various of his Pensieves that he had arranged in neat alphabetical order. His hand hovered over the M section, and then pulled out the Pensieve labeled, in neat letters, My time with Falco Parkinson.

James had just unfolded the Daily Prophet when he felt the tingle in the wards that announced an owl coming through. He waited for a moment, and was beyond surprised to see Hedwig skim through a

window and land on the table in front of him, hooting urgently. James unbound the letters, noted the different names on them, and laid them gently down on the table. Neither Remus nor Connor was awake yet; they'd had a hard, final dueling session last night, since Remus wouldn't be able to train him for at least another few months.

"Thank you, Hedwig," he said, offering her a bit of the bacon from his plate in reward. "I'll be sure to read them in a moment." He went back to unfolding the paper.

Hedwig hit him on the head with a wing. James ducked and eyed her. Hedwig went on dancing and leaping, her hoots growing more urgent.

Ah, she wants more bacon. James handed her a larger piece. The snowy owl was engaged in swallowing it for a moment, and meanwhile, James was able to take a bite of his porridge and unfold his paper in peace.

A moment later, his porridge sprayed across the front page.

James sat back, put the paper on the table, closed his eyes, and rubbed his face. Several times. He rubbed circles on his forehead, his cheeks, his chin, and his throat. It was a calming exercise his grandmother had taught him. When he asked what it was for, she'd said, tartly, "To deal with unruly children."

When he looked again, though, the story was still there, and Hedwig was tilting her head to glare at him with one golden eye, as if to say, "You should have opened the letter when I told you to."

James shook his head and read the article, carefully. Then he slit the letter that bore his name open and looked at it.

Dear Dad:

I know that you might have seen the article by the time you read this. I'm sorry. I've told Hedwig to deliver it as fast as she can.

I was abducted by the Minister, but I'm fine. I was going to keep quiet about it at first, but I was convinced by a friend that I wanted to spread the word. I know that reporters might descend on you now. I'm sorry about that.

You can tell them that you don't know anything more than what's in the article. That might be best.

I promise, Dad, that I'm fine, and that Professor Snape's vigilance, or lack of it, had nothing to do with the abduction. The Hounds said they were from the Ministry, that I'd broken a few laws to do with use of Parseltongue, and that they wanted me to come along with them. One of them even assured me that I'd be allowed to bring Snape along, and then snapped me up in a Side Along Apparition before he could get near enough.

I've missed you, but I thought there must be a reason that you weren't writing to me this summer, that you were angry at me, or angry at Professor Snape, and wouldn't reply, so I didn't. I hope that you do reply to this letter. I'd still like us to be a family, Dad. I felt a little too crowded this summer, but perhaps we could try with Christmas?

Love,

Harry.

James sat back and loosed a long, angry, hissing breath. Harry's letter rambled a bit, but it included several things that James had longed to hear: that he still wanted to be part of the family, that he was fine, that he was sorry for possibly involving James and Connor and Remus with reporters.

But that wasn't enough to distract James from the obvious, something that should have been obvious even to Harry.

Snape still failed him as a guardian. Harry was kidnapped right in front of him, and he didn't do anything to stop it.

James shook his head and stood. He should have done this long since, not given up after one attempt, but he had had Connor to look after and Harry to brood about. Now Connor was going back to school, and Harry wanted to be part of the family again, and James could concentrate on getting one over on his enemy.

He was going straight to the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, to insure that he got custody of his son back.

“Sir! Sir! Please come quickly!”

Rufus carefully put down his morning cup of tea, and considered hexing whoever was beyond the door. Then he reminded himself that everyone in the Auror Office knew enough not to disturb him during his morning cup of tea, and more likely than not, that meant it was something truly urgent.

Drawing his wand, he strode across his office and opened the door. A young Auror with vividly pink hair and an unfamiliar face stood there. Thanks to the hair, Rufus recognized her anyway.

“Auror Tonks,” he said. “Is something the matter?”

“The Minister, sir! He’s screaming in his office, and sometimes sobbing!” Tonks waved her hands in agitated circles, taking a step back, and tripped over a chair. She promptly smashed into Auror Mallory’s desk, and upset the inkwell. Rufus closed his eyes in resignation as ink dripped onto her hair. Tonks continued in a more subdued tone. “Sorry, sir. But he sounds like he’s in pain, and we can’t open the door.”

“Coming,” said Rufus, with a slight growl, and locked his office behind him. The one time he hadn’t done that, someone had stolen his tea. Rufus could not abide people who stole his tea.

He followed Tonks grumpily across the office, and everyone found a reason to be elsewhere. Of course, it seemed as though a good many of his people were already missing. Rufus shook his head and snorted. All pounding on the Minister’s door and telling him pretty please to let them through?

“Why hasn’t someone opened the damn door with a Blasting Curse?” he asked Tonks, as they reached the lifts.

The young woman gave him a glance of terrified admiration. “Sir? That spell’s illegal.”

“Doesn’t tell me why they haven’t used it,” Rufus muttered, and rubbed discreetly at his hip. He was almost sixty years old, and on a morning before his tea, no matter how bright and warm the day was, the old injury that had given him his limp flared up. Crises simply shouldn’t happen before there’s tea.

“The door’s, uh, locked with some sort of spell that reacts when we try anything more violent than an Alohomora.” Tonks shrugged helplessly and, stumbling as she got into the lift, managed to press the buttons for all the levels. “Sorry, sir.”

“It’s all right,” said Rufus, and leaned on the lift wall. The gentler way down was better for his hip, anyway.

When they reached the level of the Minister’s office, Tonks took the lead, as though Rufus might not know where it was. Rufus strode—he strode, he did not limp—after her, muttering under his breath.

He found the Aurors clustered around in front of the Minister’s door, timidly knocking and calling. Rufus stepped past them and laid his wand on the door.

“Alohomorana,” he murmured. It was a variation on the Opening Spell that his grandmother Leonora had taught him. She was Muggleborn, with no sense of pureblood pride at all, and had always proclaimed that there was no reason for doors to be locked among family, which had led to a string of embarrassing incidents when Rufus’s father was sixteen or so.

He opened the door.

The volume of noise was instant and terrific. There must have been silencing charms worked into the wood of the door itself, Rufus

thought, sagging back and struggling not to put his hands over his ears.

Once he made out what the noise was about, though, his grumpiness vanished, and he wanted to cackle like his grandmother.

“—NEVER BEEN SO EMBARRASSED BY ANYTHING IN MY LIFE! I WOULD MOVE TO FRANCE IF I WERE ASSURED THEIR GOVERNMENT WAS ANY BETTER! NO, WAIT, IT COULDN'T POSSIBLY BE WORSE! I THINK I'LL BEGIN PACKING AS SOON AS POSSIBLE! AT LEAST THEIR MINISTER DOESN'T ABDUCT INNOCENT CHILDREN WITHOUT TWIRLING HIS MOUSTACHE FIRST, I SHOULDN'T THINK!”

Rufus watched in amusement as that particular Howler tore itself to pieces, only to be followed by another from the growing pile on the Minister's desk. This voice, Rufus happened to recognize from the meeting in his office yesterday. Hawthorn Parkinson did a good imitation of outrage, he thought.

“I AM STUNNED, STUNNED AND APPALLED! I HAVE NEVER HEARD OF SUCH A LOW INCIDENT IN MY LIFE, MINISTER! ARE NONE OF OUR CHILDREN SAFE IN THEIR BEDS? WILL YOU SEND YOUR HOUNDS AFTER MY DAUGHTER? THAT POOR INNOCENT BOY! I THINK IT IS TIME THAT WIZARDING BRITAIN HAD A NEW MINISTER!”

Fudge was huddling at his desk in the midst of it all, whimpering softly.

Rufus cleared his throat in the pause between Parkinson's Howler ending and another starting. Fudge looked up at him hopefully.

“That was a complicated locking charm,” said Rufus, and then he shut the door and let the spell snap back into place.

He turned to his team and shook his head solemnly. “Too bad that we couldn't rescue the poor man,” he said. “At least now we know they were only Howlers.”

“But why?” asked Auror Mallory, her pretty face concerned. “I don’t understand what all of them were yelling about.”

“Read the front page of the Daily Prophet,” Rufus told her, and strode back towards his office, his mood lighter than it had been without his tea in a long time. Of course, knowing that he was going back to his tea helped.

And after that, I can start digging.

When he got back to his office, he had a second pleasant surprise waiting for him, besides his tea. Two of his people stood with a third held between them, his head dangling sullenly. He looked up when Rufus neared, and Rufus recognized him as Gamaliel Gorgon, one of the sacked Aurors that Fudge had been using as his so-called Hounds.

“Crup, I presume?” Rufus asked indulgently.

Gorgon sagged.

“What’s so interesting about the front page, Mother?” Blaise covered a yawn with one hand. Her darling son had always had such exquisite manners, Arabella Zabini thought fondly. Of course, she had been the one to teach him, and not any of her husbands, which was probably the reason. “I didn’t think you found much of interest in the Daily Prophet normally.”

“This,” said Arabella simply, and passed over the paper so that he could see. She herself had already read the article four times, with each pass looking for a different layer of meaning, and believed she had found them all. Her lips seemed permanently fixed in a smile this morning. Clever boy.

And it makes that letter I received yesterday all the more pathetic.

Blaise blinked at the headline and said, “Goddamn.”

“Blaise,” Arabella chided, looking around the sitting room. She had worked hard to find all the prettiest portraits for her little home.

Unfortunately, many of those pretty portraits were easily offended high society witches, and they were turning now to glare at Blaise. "Language."

"Sorry, sorry," her son muttered, and went back to reading. When he looked up, his eyes were narrowed. "Do you really think—I mean, did this really happen?"

"At least some of it did, my darling," said Arabella. "After all, I do not believe that either Potter or Skeeter are stupid enough to create a story that could be so easily disproved."

Blaise nodded, his eyes glowing. "Will this mean a new Minister?"

"That is the least of what it will mean." Arabella leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Now go get your breakfast from the house elves, and we'll discuss this further when you come back. I don't want you halfway to falling asleep when we do."

"Yes, Mother," said Blaise, with a perfect little bow of his head, and trotted to the kitchens.

Arabella chuckled at the article and then moved towards her writing desk. Yes, she did think, rather, that answering the letter with a regretful negative was the wiser course.

Not to mention that I may have something of my own to offer in an alliance with Potter, while this other would make me only a servant.

Her gaze brushed across the shelf of books written in Parseltongue, and then back to the writing desk, at which she sat with a stretch of her hands and a toss of her long, dark hair.

It was a glorious morning to be alive.
"Here they come."

Harry rolled his eyes at Draco's statement of the obvious, but nodded. "Here they come," he repeated, and locked his eyes on the carriages rolling towards Hogwarts's front doors. At the corner of his vision, the tiny lighted boats carrying the first-years bobbed across the lake.

The carriages were all drawn by thestrals, who snorted and tossed their wings when Harry looked at them. Harry looked uneasily away again. He hadn't yet spoken to any thestrals, and suspected he wouldn't be able to without help. He wondered what they would want from him, what kind of freedom they would ask.

It probably depends on why they're bound, doesn't it?

Well, whatever it is, it can't be any worse than the letters I've received.

Harry winced. He had not foreseen that Skeeter's article would result in a flood of post of his own. He'd had a few Howlers, accusing him of being an attention-seeker, but far fewer than he thought he would. And there were countless outpourings of sympathy, boxes of Chocolate Frogs, offers to adopt him and keep him safe, declarations of outrage that the Minister would kidnap an innocent child, sniffing admirations of his bravery, and on and on. Harry was beginning to think that Skeeter had played up the angle of his innocence and his youth too much.

The lead carriage had just about reached them—Harry and Draco stood not far in front of the entrance to the school—when Regulus snarled in his head. Harry turned at once, spinning a complete circle and letting his hand fall to his sleeve, where he carried his wand, by reflex. "What is it?"

Death Eater, Regulus snarled. One. Come through a hole in the wards.

Harry felt his own lips part in a snarl. He had thought that Dumbledore had found and sealed all the holes in the Hogwarts anti-Apparition wards that Sirius had torn or told the Death Eaters about last year, but it seemed he'd missed one.

He turned to face the carriages again, and then saw her, Bellatrix Lestrange, laughing loudly and absurdly. She stood beside an open carriage, one arm linked around the throat of a pretty, black-haired girl in Ravenclaw robes. The girl was gasping and struggling to fight

back, but Bellatrix muttered something, with a wave of her wand, and she went limp.

“Harry!” Bellatrix screamed, her voice thin and quite mad. “Murderer! Are you going to face me? Or shall I have all the babies?” She smiled at the children still in the carriage, and their shrieks of terror rose, blending with cries from elsewhere. “Mine to pluck like ripe fruit, aren’t they, yes?”

Harry moved slowly forward, his hands clearly spread in front of him. He felt Draco at his right shoulder, and snapped, “Stay back.” Draco halted, flinching.

Harry faced Bellatrix, noting the way she held her hostage in front of her, so that she had a human shield against most of the hexes and jinxes that Harry might throw. She was also handy with a Shield Charm, come to that. Harry’s mind was racing now, filled with fury and filled with disgust. What kind of tactic is it, to involve children in our fight?

“You want me, Bellatrix,” he said. “I’m the only one you want. Let her go, and you can have me.”

He heard Draco let out an anguished cry, but Bellatrix’s laughter overrode it. “Little boy,” she whispered. “Harry. Child. I know exactly how to hurt you, and letting this baby go isn’t it.”

Harry waited, waited, waited. He had the answer now, since he didn’t think Bellatrix was any good with wandless magic. But he needed her to move her wand away from the Ravenclaw girl’s throat, and he also needed to make sure that she retreated, instead of just grabbing hold of her hostage, as she would if he simply disarmed her. He decided to try a taunt. He snorted. “And do you really think you can take me, Bella?” he asked. “I destroyed your lord and your husband easily enough. In fact, I only had to strike once to destroy them both.”

Bellatrix snarled and jerked, extending her wand towards him.

Harry narrowed his focus to her hand, her wand, and thought as hard as he could, compelling the spell to follow to a single point.

Sectumsemptra!

Snape's cutting spell flew. Harry could feel its tense soaring across the grass between him and Bellatrix, and had a moment to reflect that if he had misjudged, it would also slice the Ravenclaw girl to shreds—

He had not misjudged.

Bellatrix's right arm exploded in a fountain of blood, her right hand and wand flying free. Harry saw the jagged slice of bone, severed to stick out of the stump that had been her right wrist. Bellatrix screamed and staggered back, lost in the pain, releasing her hostage as she moved.

Harry didn't hesitate. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The Ravenclaw girl skimmed towards him, past the wheels of the carriage, and Harry caught her and laid her gently on the ground. Then he lifted his eyes back to Bellatrix, certain that she would retreat, but ready to give battle if she did not.

Bellatrix stared back at him, clutching the ruin of her right arm, and Harry had never seen such pure hatred in anyone's eyes before.

"My Lord will have you," she whispered. "And I will."

Then she Apparated out.

Harry let out a harsh gasp and bent over the Ravenclaw girl, hearing Draco come up behind him as he slapped her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered and opened as Bellatrix's sleeping spell loosed its hold on her.

"Hush," Harry told her gently when she opened her mouth to scream. "She's gone. You're safe now."

The girl nodded shakily at him and sat up. "Did you rescue me?" she whispered, and Harry nodded again. "Thank you."

Harry had time to give her a smile and step away from her before someone's hand clasped him firmly on the shoulder, a clasp just this side of pain, and an unfamiliar voice said, "What's this, then?"

Chapter Twelve: The Old Mastiff

Harry turned with the grip on his shoulder, gaze fixing on the man who stood over him. He tried, automatically, to meet the man's eyes, but found it unexpectedly difficult.

Of course, one of the eyes was a blue coin rolling around to the back of his skull, which would have puzzled even Snape on how to meet it, Harry thought. The other was dark, but piercing, and looked through Harry as though judging him for the Dark spell he had just used.

Harry knew where he was when he looked at the man's face and saw the scars that twisted over every inch of skin, and the nose that looked as though someone had taken a hammer to it. Add to that a wooden leg replacing the real one, and Harry was on firm ground. "Auror Moody," he said.

The man's hand loosened on his shoulder, and Moody let out a blistering laugh, shifting his weight onto his good leg. "Not Auror any more, boy," he said. "Retired. And your new Defense professor, at Dumbledore's request." He studied Harry for a moment with a grim smile, then pulled the collar of his robe away from his neck. "And I suppose it's only fair that you know about this."

Harry blinked when he saw the silver gleam of a collar that was similar to the ones the Hounds wore.

Regulus snarled in his head. Maybe he was the one I sensed before, as well as Bellatrix. I think he must have a connection to Voldemort of some kind, Harry, but that damn collar is in the way. Can you ask him to take it off?

Harry blinked again and met Moody's eyes; the blue one had rolled into the front of his skull to stare at him. You ask him, he thought.

"Heard that you had a bit of trouble with former Aurors wearing collars like these," said Moody expansively. "You don't have to worry, boy. I was the one who made them, back when we had to face real Dark wizards every day, not bored children like Fudge and fourteen-year-old Parselmouths." He spat. "These 'Hounds' copied my design. I

don't take mine off, but I'm also not under Fudge's control." He smiled, and his eye spun wildly. "Just so that you know."

Harry nodded at him, then turned and knelt over the Ravenclaw girl again. He supposed that Moody had some other reason for coming over than just to speak to him about the collar, but since the professor was done talking, Harry intended to see the girl to the hospital wing.

"What's your name?" he asked, as he helped her to her feet.

"Harry," Draco whined.

"Cho Chang," said the girl, with a faint smile at him. "And you're Harry Potter, of course. No need to ask that."

"Harry," Draco insisted.

Harry balanced Cho on his shoulder—she was taller than he was, but considerably lighter—and peered at Draco. "What?"

Draco was watching Cho with an expression of intense distaste, but, Harry thought, that was nothing new. Draco seemed to be jealous of any other person who touched Harry for so much as a second. "Can't Professor Moody take her to the hospital wing?" he said. "I think that you should get back inside the wards. There was just a Death Eater here, in case you forgot."

Harry blinked. Yes, he had forgotten. And now that he thought about it, he wondered how he could have. The image of Bellatrix's arm erupting in blood and bone was vivid, just waiting behind his eyes to pounce him.

He shuddered and glanced at Professor Moody, who had stalked over to the bloody mess on the ground that was Bellatrix's hand and wand. He prodded at them for a moment, then knelt with a grunt and a splay of his wooden leg. Harry watched in sick fascination as he unfolded the fingers from the wand.

"Don't want to leave Death Eaters' wands lying about, boy," he said, wagging the long black stick at Harry. "Nasty business. I've known

more than one of them to be a death trap for enemies.” He drew his own wand and waved it at the one he held. “Inopia!”

The wand shivered once, and then a cage of blue force built around it. Harry shivered. Perhaps she’s good at wandless magic after all, he thought, to Apparate away after leaving her wand here. Or perhaps someone else snatched her.

Or perhaps Moody had something to do with it, Regulus suggested in his head. I don’t think I trust him, Harry.

Like I said, said Harry, readjusting Cho’s weight on his shoulder, you can be the one to ask him if he can bare his left arm and show you the lack of a Dark Mark. I’ll believe his story about the collar for right now, until I learn otherwise. A Hound wouldn’t be stupid enough to come in openly wearing the collar, anyway.

You never know, Regulus muttered, but he fell obligingly silent.

“Sorry about this,” Harry said to Cho, as they started to walk towards the school. Cho was recovering with every step of the way, but Harry didn’t like the way she breathed. She must have at least a slight case of shock, from being so suddenly snatched and used as a hostage like that. “Even with what tends to happen around me, that was a bit extreme.”

“I’ve been reading the papers over the summer,” Cho assured him as they walked up the front steps of Hogwarts. “I thought this was practically normal for you.”

Harry gave her a surprised glance, and then snorted when he saw the smile curving her lips. “Practically,” he agreed. “But this is the first time that I’ve ever really managed to wound a Death Eater, instead of the other way around.”

“Good,” said Cho. “I wouldn’t want her to get away unharmed for attacking me.”

Harry reevaluated the girl as he helped her limp down the corridors to the hospital wing (it seemed she’d also twisted her ankle when

Bellatrix flung her the ground). Cho was already recovering, color flushing her cheeks again, her head coming up and a faint grimace of embarrassment twisting her mouth whenever she looked at Harry. Harry supposed she was stronger than she looked.

Of course, she plays for Ravenclaw, doesn't she? he recalled abruptly. Their Seeker. She would have to be less delicate than she looks.

"Harry."

Harry blinked and turned around. Draco was in the hallway behind them, panting as though he'd run to catch up with them.

"Professor Snape wants to see you right now," he said. "I'll take Chang the rest of the way to the hospital wing."

He glared at Cho, who blinked back, frowning slightly, as though she didn't know what she'd done to earn Draco's enmity. Harry rolled his eyes. The jealousy was rising off Draco like steam, and he would have wagered many things that this was only a ploy to get him away from the girl.

He can calm down. No one else is going to become a better friend to me than he is.

Harry would have wagered that, and refused to abandon Cho, if Draco hadn't chosen Snape as the excuse. Snape would have assigned Draco detention in moments if he found himself being used in a trick like that.

That meant he really did want to see Harry.

Harry nodded apologetically to Cho. "Professor Snape is my legal guardian, and I sort of have to do what he says. If you don't mind—"

"Not at all," Cho assured him. "I told you, I read the papers. And I think it's wonderful that Professor Snape is looking after you. Obviously, the Ministry can't be trusted to make the proper legal

deposition for you.” She squeezed his hand, giving him a sympathetic smile.

Harry nodded back to her, with a smile in return. At least there’s someone in the world who doesn’t think Professor Snape is an unfit guardian. He turned and trotted in the direction of the dungeons, while Draco took his place at Cho’s side.

Draco waited until Harry was out of sight and earshot before he spoke. He’d walked with Chang, of course, and the idiotic girl had tried to make a few stabs at conversation, but he ignored them. He was just making sure there was no chance that Harry could hear them.

When he was certain, he turned and glared straight at Chang. She’d opened her mouth to say something else, but she closed it now and watched him with her eyebrows drawn down. “What’s the matter?” she asked after a moment.

“Stay away from him,” said Draco softly. “Stay away, do you hear?” It was a blunter threat than he might have made otherwise, but he could still see the way that his aunt had faced Harry, and the surge of pride and terror he’d felt on seeing Harry’s Dark spell. It was wrong that Harry had felt forced to defend the Chang girl like that. He didn’t want to use violent spells; Draco knew he didn’t. And that spell was not only violent, it was also Dark. Draco knew, if Harry didn’t, that the sympathy of the wizarding public was as easy to lose as it was to gain. Let word get out of him doing Dark spells, and more people might swing back to support the Minister.

Chang shrugged at him, uncomprehending. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Malfoy,” she said. “At the very least, I owe him thanks for saving my life, which I’ll present to him more formally later. And it looks like he knows a lot of magic. I’ve never even heard of that spell he used on the Death Eater.” Her dark eyes sparkled with a Ravenclaw’s curiosity. “I could probably learn a lot from him.”

“So you are planning on talking to him again?” Draco demanded.

Chang lifted one of her eyebrows. "I would think that would be obvious."

Draco drew his wand. Chang took a hobbling step backward, supporting an obviously twisted ankle, but didn't draw her own. She just watched in fascination while Draco hissed at her, "I don't want you coming near him again." Once again, he felt compelled to be blunt. Harry had actually been talking with the girl, smiling at her. He had obviously been comfortable in her company. There weren't many people Harry was comfortable with. Draco didn't want the circle to expand further.

Chang didn't back down, to Draco's fury. She simply watched him with her head on one side, the skin around her eyes pulled tight in a frown, as though trying to figure out why he would do this.

"Promise me," Draco whispered, one of the nasty little hexes that his father had taught him an inch from his lips.

"I think that you should ask Harry about that," said Chang calmly, not moving. "After all, does he usually let you choose his friends for him? There was nothing in the papers about that."

Draco's fury grew. Her words forced him to think back to Snape's pronouncement yesterday evening, that he was acting irrational. He didn't want to think that he was acting irrationally. He was the only one who knew the actual depth of his love for Harry, and that meant he was the only one who had the right to make decisions based on that.

"I mean it, Chang," he said, striving for a tone that would permanently scare the girl. "Stay away from him."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Are you going to help me to the hospital wing or not?"

Draco studied her. She was avoiding his eyes now, and making odd little grimaces of pain as she hopped, obviously trying to avoid supporting weight on her ankle. Draco noted that she hadn't said she would stay away from Harry.

Well, she hadn't said she wouldn't, either. Draco was content, for now, to put his wand away and help her, so that he could tell Harry he had, later. If she came near him again, then he could hex her without remorse.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Harry asked, putting his head around the door of Snape's office. In truth, he was shocked that Snape was still here. He'd have expected him to be at the Sorting Feast by now, overseeing the introduction of the new Slytherins into his House. But perhaps the Sorting Feast had been delayed for the Death Eater attack. Harry wouldn't have put it past Dumbledore to make sure everyone was calmed down and could properly enjoy the food and the Sorting, perhaps with some of his compulsion.

"Yes," said Snape, his voice quiet. He was watching a bubbling cauldron, full of a clear potion that Harry didn't recognize. "I want to know why you used the spell that you did against Bellatrix Lestrange."

Harry winced. He really didn't think his guardian was angry. He sounded weary, which was worse. "It was the best one I could think of," he answered honestly. "I thought she could resist an Expelliarmus, and I wanted to cause enough damage that she would retreat from the field permanently." He shrugged. "Making her leave her wand behind was just a bonus."

Snape turned around. Harry blinked. He had never seen that particular expression on his guardian's face before, rather as if Snape had watched him drop off a cliff and then winds levitate him back up. It was a fortunate coincidence, but one couldn't count on it to happen again.

"Sir?" Harry whispered.

Snape strode across the room to him and stared down into his face. Harry stared back, craning his neck to do so.

"I have accepted that you are in danger from moment to moment, whatever you may think of me," Snape began quietly. "I have accepted that many of those dangers, I can do nothing about. I can

only make sure that you know the spells and the defenses that you will need to survive them.

“But there is one danger that I can make sure you do know about, Harry, because I was in the thick of it from the time I was seventeen to the time I was nineteen.”

Harry blinked. “When you were part of the Death Eaters, sir?”

Snape bowed his head with a sharp slashing motion. “When I was willingly a Death Eater,” he agreed. “I used Dark spells before any other kind. I struck with the same kind of motivation that you used on Bellatrix tonight—that I had to make sure I killed or wounded my enemies before they could do me any harm. Oh, I told myself I was fighting to protect innocents, so that no pureblood child would ever have to know any harm from Muggles, but an excuse was all it was in the end.”

Harry swallowed. “Sir,” he said, his voice wavering, “I hardly think you need to worry about me becoming a Death Eater.”

“That is the one thing I will never fear from you,” said Snape, his voice going dry for a moment. Then it sobered again, into that tone that was frightening on its own, because Harry had never heard it from Snape before. “But I think I do need to worry about you using Dark spells, violent spells, as solutions to your problems. You are powerful, Harry. You could have done many things to Bellatrix other than cut off her hand. Why did you choose that instead?”

Harry shook his head. “I—don’t know. It seemed to fit, once I’d thought of it. Cause her pain, make her retreat, and render her harmless to anyone else. But then she Apparated out, so maybe I haven’t rendered her harmless.”

Snape nodded again. “We all had abilities that we hid,” he said, as if musing. Harry held his breath. Snape rarely talked about his time among the Death Eaters. “It may well be that one of Bellatrix’s was wandless magic, or at least the ability to Apparate without the spell. There are a few other times that has happened.” He focused on Harry again, and his eyes glittered, bright and sharp and present. “If you will

use Dark spells and study the Dark Arts, and not just the defense against them, then you will do it with me. You are still less experienced with offensive magic than other kinds, Harry. You could have slipped up tonight and sliced the Chang girl, and if someone had not got to her in time, she would have bled to death. And with the Dark magic yesterday..." Snape shook his head. "I take it that I need not tell you how dangerous that was."

Harry winced. "Yes."

"Go to the Feast," said Snape, still quietly. "I will be along in a few moments. And remember, Harry. With Dark magic as with any other kind, you need to know and understand it before you use it, not afterwards."

Harry bowed his head, then slipped out of the office. He made it a few steps up the hallway before he stopped and leaned on the wall. He was shaking.

I really didn't think, did I? Just reached out and chose that spell, and then focused it on Bellatrix's hand. Snape is right. There are less dangerous things I could have done, both for myself and for those around me.

If I'm reckless with Dark magic the way I was with my life last year, then I stand to hurt not only myself, but other people.

I never want to be like that.

He stood, straightened his shoulders, and went to the Feast, grateful for the company of chattering voices at the Slytherin table and Draco's warm press against his shoulder as he slid into the seat beside him.

"Harry!"

Harry turned around, with a smile on his face, as Connor ducked under Ron's arm and hurried towards him. He and Draco were on their way to breakfast, and Harry could feel his friend shifting impatiently beside him, but he could certainly spare a few moments to

greet his brother. He'd smiled at him across the Great Hall last night, but had had no chance to get away. All the Slytherins wanted to talk to him about his summer and his abduction and his use of Dark magic and what spell he'd done in saving Cho.

Connor hugged him, roughly, and Harry was a bit surprised to realize that they were of a height now. Connor's hair had also gone slightly wilder, as though trying to look more like Harry's, and flopped back and forth over his heart-shaped scar as he held Harry back a short distance and examined him critically.

"You'll do," he said at last. "I suppose Snape's been feeding you properly?"

Harry rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. He thought both Connor and James must think that Snape was feeding him on grave dirt and cobwebs, or perhaps James just thought that and had given the impression to his brother. "Yes, fine. Not as fine as the meals at Lux Aeterna, maybe, but more interesting. We eat while we're discussing potions sometimes."

Connor wrinkled his nose. "Harry, try not to bore me to death before we even get to class, all right?" He turned and walked beside Harry into the Great Hall, ignoring both Draco's attempt to shove him away and Ron's prompt and growing spat with Draco. "Lux Aeterna was boring without you," he confessed in a murmur. "Dad and Remus tried, but there's only so much dueling you can do before it gets boring. Same with reading. And sometimes Remus wouldn't duel with me—"

"Near the full moon?" Harry asked. They were near the point where they would have to split to go to their House tables, but he decided, abruptly, that he wanted to sit with his brother this morning, custom be damned. There was no actual rule that someone from Slytherin House couldn't eat at the Gryffindor table, so he strolled over with Connor and sat down with a nod at the various other people gathered there, listening as Connor talked to him.

"Well, yes, then, of course." Connor piled his plate high with pancakes and handed the platter to Harry, who mimicked him. He

seemed to be hungrier lately than he had ever been in his life, Harry thought dimly. "But sometimes he sat around and relived memories of the First War and said that he wished Sirius was alive to help train me, that that was the only way I would ever gain a greater understanding of some of the spells." Connor winced. "I think he wanted me to be in deep mourning with him half the time, and laugh half the time to help heal him of his grief."

Harry stifled his irritation that Remus would ask that of Connor. Remus probably hadn't even realized he was asking it. And it wasn't Connor's fault that he wasn't the type of person to lie around on his bed for weeks and refuse to eat when he was grieving someone. "That does sound boring," he agreed around a mouthful of pancakes. "I was relieved to hear that you'd got home all right from the World Cup. Did you suffer any injuries when the crowd started running?"

Connor shook his head, looking faintly amused. "That Ill Wind curse roused protective instincts in Dad. I think it sent him back about fifteen years, to when he used to be an Auror. He grabbed me, ran to the nearest Portkey, and got us out right away. Luckily, he went to Lux Aeterna and not somewhere else."

Harry nodded. "I thought something like that might have happened, but I wasn't sure."

"Harry, what are you doing?"

Harry blinked and looked up at Draco, who sounded far more indignant than he should, given that Harry hadn't run out of his sight or battled any Death Eaters this morning. "Having breakfast," he said.

"With them?" Draco made it sound as though the Gryffindor table was thick with flobberworms.

Harry caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned his head. The Weasley twins were sitting a few seats down from Connor, and had turned to watch Draco. A speculative gleam lit their eyes. Harry winced. "Um, Draco," he said, "some of them are my friends, too, and a lot of them are Connor's friends. Yes, I wanted to have breakfast with them."

Draco folded his arms. "Well, I don't want you to have breakfast with them."

Harry rolled his eyes and turned away, taking a bite of the pancakes. It was best just to ignore Draco when he was like this. He would get past it soon enough, especially when he saw how unimpressed Harry was with his childish behavior.

Draco's hand abruptly latched onto his shoulder. "Come on, Harry," he hissed in his ear, sounding furious. "Let's go back to the Slytherin table, where we're at home and we belong."

"Harry doesn't just belong there," Connor spoke up. "We all read the papers, Malfoy. Harry dashed into danger at the World Cup to save everyone else. I think that's pretty damn Gryffindor."

He looked along the table. Surprised, Harry followed his gaze, and saw other people nodding, or at least not looking as if they disagreed outright. Neville Longbottom caught his eye and gave him a shy smile.

"Yeah," he said, loud enough to make just a few people turn to him. He coughed and repeated himself. "Yeah! Harry was brave, and I think that means that he can sit here if he wants." He flinched then, as if expecting to be attacked by a pride of rabid lions, but Hermione, looking up from her book just then, nodded firmly.

"Yes, he can," she said. "And I want to know more about the Ill Wind curse, Harry, and what you did to counter it."

Harry relaxed. Having a discussion of what Rosier had done in the abstract was just the thing he needed to keep the memories of what it had been really like at bay. "Well, the Ill Wind curse affects the mind, so there are a few ways of fighting it. I used the Ventus spell on Draco. That clears his thoughts with a wind from my own thoughts, which had resisted the spell. But you have to look someone directly in the eye to do that, so of course it's of limited use with that many people. The other solution is Finite Incantatem, but—"

Draco abruptly seized his shoulder and yanked, hard. Harry released his fork and plate in time for them to land on the table, but his spoon went flying across the room and hit someone else on the head, provoking a startled yelp.

Harry tensed his muscles and called up his magic, breaking free of Draco's grip with a twist. "What the hell are you doing?" he snarled at his friend, straightening up and brushing at his robe where Draco had knocked it askew.

"We are going to eat at the Slytherin table," said Draco. "I don't like being here."

"Then go sit down at the Slytherin table." Harry had to fight to control his anger. Draco had always been protective of him, but, in this case, there was nothing to be protective about. The Gryffindors were being perfectly pleasant. "I'll join you for lunch, I promise you."

"Oh, does poor ickle Draco not feel at home at the Gryffindor table?" one of the Weasley twins crooned abruptly. "Don't worry, we'll make it all better for him."

Harry turned just in time to see the twins make flinging motions with their hands, wrists snapping in unfamiliar motions. Two small objects flew towards Draco, exploding at his feet. Trails of scarlet smoke raced into the air and curled around Draco, hiding him entirely from sight for a moment.

When the smoke cleared, most people stared and began roaring with laughter. Harry could even hear chuckles coming from the Slytherin table.

Draco now had hair in shocking shades of Gryffindor red and gold. His tie was striped in the same colors, with a prancing lion in the center of it, which paced and roared quite realistically. His robes had gone gold in the top half, scarlet in the bottom, and appeared to be covered in stars, from the way they glittered.

Harry shook his head. The twins really were magical geniuses. Harry could have willed that effect into being, maybe, but he could not have

combined the dozens of small spells they would have had to combine to produce it.

The twins were half-collapsed over the table, they were laughing so hard. Even Connor had joined in, though Harry thought he had tried to resist, for his brother's sake. Neville was blinking, but other than that, the only one at the Gryffindor table not laughing was Harry.

Draco stood where he was for a moment, face Gryffindor red with humiliation, then turned and ran out of the room.

Harry tried to find it in himself to feel sorry for Draco, and couldn't. Draco had been asking for it. It was one thing to complain and moan and grumble about the Gryffindors—most of Slytherin House had done that, at some time or another—but another thing altogether to try and tug Harry away when he'd agreed to have breakfast with them. Harry rolled his eyes and turned back to his pancakes, hoping that the twins' enchantments would wear off soon.

"Harry?"

Harry blinked and turned around. He'd been so occupied with watching Draco and the results of the prank that he hadn't noticed a small delegation approaching him from the Ravenclaw table. Cho was in the lead of it, but behind her were a girl that Harry vaguely knew from his own year, Padma Patil, and Luna. Harry smiled at Luna, who gave him a slow, dreamy smile back.

"Hi, Cho," said Harry. "Has your ankle recovered?"

"Madam Pomfrey healed it in an instant, thank you," said Cho. "But I did not yet thank you properly for what you did in saving my life." She inclined her head and held forth a silver plate that Harry took in bewilderment. He studied it. It was round, with a pattern of what he thought were trumpet flowers along the sides. He had never seen anything like it that he could remember.

"My family has been dedicated to the Light for generations," said Cho, solemnly, and turned to take a small object from Padma. "But that does not mean we cannot recognize the old magic of sacrifice and life

debt. We simply choose a different means to acknowledge it than blood.”

She set the object in the center of the plate. It was a dish, Harry saw, also silver, with its sides worked as petals. It was also empty, but it tingled with magic when it was set down, and then sealed itself to the center of the plate. Harry balanced it carefully. It really wasn’t much heavier than the plate alone had been, and he had to marvel at the craftsmanship.

“I choose to acknowledge my debt with water and with air, with earth and with fire,” Cho went on, utterly serene, as she took a pitcher from Luna. She turned around again, and Harry realized for the first time that she wore a silver clip in her long dark hair, shaped like a trumpet flower itself. “Metal from the earth, forged with the aid of fire, and water that has fallen from the sky.” Carefully, she poured the pitcher’s contents into the dish.

Harry saw it was rainwater, silver and trembling. It landed in the dish and rippled for a moment, then stood utterly still.

Cho extended a hand towards plate and bowl and water, and whispered, “Memento vitae.”

All three objects promptly began to shine with a white light so brilliant that Harry had to shield his eyes. When he could see again, they had become a silver bracelet, edged with a pattern of trumpet flowers, and trembling in color like rainwater. Harry held it up and stared at it.

“I—thank you,” he said.

“I owe you my life,” said Cho simply. “This is a reminder of it. If you are ever in danger, touch the bracelet and repeat Memento vitae. I will hear it, or a member of my family will if I cannot help you, and we will come.” She fixed her dark eyes on Harry’s face, and waited to hear what he would say.

Harry nodded and clasped the bracelet around his wrist. “Thank you. I will wear it with pride.”

Cho bowed once, and then turned and walked back towards the Ravenclaw table, Padma and Luna following her. Harry turned and sat back down, blinking, at the Gryffindor table.

“You have to teach me Light rituals,” said Hermione abruptly, shattering the silence. “There’s so much I don’t understand!”

Harry, relieved, joined in the laughter this time.

Snape narrowed his eyes as he stood to make his way to his first class. He had seen the pressure Draco put on Harry, and he understood it, probably far better than either boy did.

He would not be able to use detentions, either to give Draco more freedom and time apart from Harry, or to simply separate the boys. He would have to give Draco something to occupy his time alone, something special and personal and answering to his interests.

A certain Potions book, waiting patiently on the shelf in his office, contained the answer.

Chapter Thirteen: Scorpions of Ice

“—And stay out!”

Harry flinched and backed away from the door to the fourth-year boys' bedroom, shaking his head. Draco glared at him one more time, still from beneath a shock of red-and-gold hair—no one had managed to reverse the twins' enchantment, and Snape had given Draco a detention for bursting out shouting about it in Double Potions—and then slammed the door. That made Harry's ears ring again.

“Surprised, Potter?”

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Blaise Zabini was sitting half-sunk in one of the large, comfortable green couches in front of the hearth, his Charms book propped on his lap.

“Somewhat, yes,” said Harry flatly, dropping into the chair across from Blaise. “By a number of things.”

Blaise grinned and stuck a finger in the page of his book. “Come on, then, Potter. Tell me about them.” He cupped a hand around his ear and wagged his fingers back and forth. “No one ever said I wasn't good at listening.”

But you never really cared to listen before, Harry thought, and glanced again at the shut door. Probably it was only Draco's spectacular outburst that had earned the attention of the most standoffish member of Slytherin House's younger years.

Harry shrugged. Draco, now probably sprawled on the outermost of the room's four beds and scowling at the ceiling with his hands folded behind his head, was not going to give him any answers. If Blaise would, then Harry could put up with his generally irritating and condescending presence.

“All right. First question.” Harry brought his gaze back to Blaise's face. “Why is Draco so angry at me? I tried to reverse the enchantment, and I told him what Cho's bracelet meant when he asked.”

Blaise clucked his tongue. "But you didn't do it quickly enough, Potter. And you didn't do what would really have pleased him. And Malfoys are accustomed to being pleased, you know."

"Then I'm asking about that, too." Harry ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "I must have made some big mistake with him, but I don't remember what it was. He was fine just a few days ago, when—" "He realized just in time that revealing the meeting with his allies to Blaise would be a tactical error. He had met Blaise's mother only once, on Walpurgis Night in the spring, and there was no reason to think, yet, that she was interested in an alliance. He continued the sentence as smoothly as possible. "When he saw me after the Minister's attack. And since then, we've been together every moment, except when he ran off after breakfast and I went to see Professor Snape yesterday evening. I don't know what could be bothering him."

"You're not paying as much attention to him as you used to, of course," said Blaise, sitting back in the couch and looking at Harry as if he were an idiot. "Would you have gone and sat with your brother at breakfast last year?"

"My brother was an idiot most of last year," said Harry. He wasn't sure what felt better, being able to admit that or knowing that Connor's idiocy was mostly in the past.

"So, you wouldn't have," Blaise poked.

"No."

Blaise nodded. "So Draco might think that he's losing you to other friends, or that he could." He extended a hand in front of him and flipped it over. "And then you didn't come after him when he fled the Great Hall."

"He'd done an idiotic thing," said Harry flatly. "And I wanted to stay and talk to Connor and the other Gryffindors."

"I'm sure you did," said Blaise. "And it would have been...undiplomatic to appear to run from Chang just when she was approaching to offer you a formal thanks. So I agree about that."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "In case it escaped you here, I'm asking for help, Blaise. What else should I have done?"

"I suppose that depends on whether you're thinking like a Malfoy or not." Blaise dropped his Charms textbook altogether and linked his hands behind his head. He's enjoying this, Harry realized. Of course, Blaise had long said he got off on other people's pain; he even took Care of Magical Creatures mainly to enjoy the moments when one of Hagrid's pets got out of control and bit someone else. "According to Draco, you should have come after him immediately. Malfoys are used to getting what they want. Someone interested in allying with the Light families would say that you should have stayed and negotiated with Chang the way you did. Your brother would probably say that you should have spent time with him." Blaise shrugged. "What do you think, Harry?"

Harry cocked his head. Remember, he's the son of a Dark but unaligned witch. And he's testing you now.

Harry had been aware of the glances the other Slytherins gave him ever since he got back into the House common room yesterday. Most of them were sidelong or sneaked, and some were accompanied by smiles and some by frowns, but the one thing all of them did was weigh and measure. Harry knew that some of their families were Dark and unaligned, some Light and unaligned, some undeclared. Some were the children of Death Eaters. Harry would have to remember the affiliations of each and every member of Slytherin House he talked with, especially someone like Blaise, whom he didn't know well.

Luckily, his mother's training had honed him for that.

"I think that I should have done exactly what I did," said Harry, "seeing as it was what I did, and I have to live with the effects whether I like them or not."

Blaise's face relaxed into a small smile. "I can at least appreciate the cleverness of that," he said.

Harry shook his head, and resisted the impulse to say that it wasn't cleverness, just truth. Let your enemies think they know more of you than they do, and fill in the gaps with their own inventions. That particular thought came along with his mother's voice, her intonation, and he put the pain aside, too. "All right. So Draco has to remain a volatile ingredient for now. Second question, then, or set of them. Where's Greg?"

Blaise's face tightened, and then drained of all expression. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Harry snorted. "It's true that I don't spend all that much time with Greg or Vince, but I do notice when one of them is missing, Blaise. I know that he's not attending Hogwarts this year. Why?"

Blaise fidgeted with his hands in his lap a moment. "What makes you think I know anything?" he asked.

"Because you tensed up when I asked."

Blaise said something under his breath that was probably a curse. Then he said, "Look, Harry." Harry blinked at the sudden switch to his first name, and then realized that it had probably been meant to throw him off-guard. "I do know. That much is true. But there's also a reason that no one has mentioned it around you yet." He looked up. "Political reasons."

Harry made himself relax, even smile. "I hope I've shown I'm very much open to allying with Dark wizards and witches."

"Yes," said Blaise. "And that helps. But you're also the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, and blood speaks louder than actions or oaths for a lot of the older families." He leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes slightly, lowering his voice until it was barely more than a whisper. "Harry, we know that you're your own side, in a lot of ways, but we also know which side you're never, ever going to stand for. We're not stupid."

It didn't take Harry long to make the connection, after that.

Voldemort. The Death Eaters. Greg's father was a Death Eater, and only cleared on the word of Lucius Malfoy.

His father has removed him from school because he doesn't want him sleeping in the same room, in the same House, with the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived. Or maybe he just wants to get him out of the way of the war. But either way, it's the only reason no one would mention him around me.

Harry opened his eyes fully and looked at Blaise. The boy was giving him a cool look, but beneath the surface, it had an awful lot in common with the gaze of a trapped hare. Either way he leaped, he had a lot to fear from the two sides.

Harry gave him a grim smile. "Don't worry," he said. "I know what you mean. And I won't tell anyone that you told."

Blaise let go his tension, bit by bit. "Thanks, Potter," he muttered. "From anyone else, I'd wonder what they wanted, but you...I just believe you when you say that, you know?" He sounded faintly disgusted with himself.

"I wish other people would," muttered Harry, with a glance at the door to their room, and then stood. At least his schoolbag was still in the common room, where he'd dropped it after Charms that afternoon. He might as well get started, both on the more mundane homework that he could easily pretend to be average at and on the complicated Potions research that Snape had set him—and on his own efforts to improve the Calming Potion. There had to be a way, even if twenty years of research hadn't found it. Draco lay on his bed and stewed.

No, he lay on his bed and seethed. The other word sounded too common, too plebian, for his grand and overpowering rage.

It had not been a good day. After the debacle of breakfast, he had found that he couldn't reverse the twins' enchantment; in fact, trying only made his hair and his robes begin to radiate scarlet and gold auras. Then he had encountered Harry as they went in for Potions,

and Harry had refused to apologize for sitting at the Gryffindor table, and had shown off the life debt bracelet from that bitch Chang, and totally failed to understand why Draco was so upset with him. Draco had yelled at him, as was within his rights, and Snape had given him a detention.

Then the enchantments wouldn't come off for the rest of the day. When Draco made his way back to the Slytherin common room, Harry had followed him. At first, he had been gratifyingly apologetic, but then he had asked what he had done to make Draco so upset. Draco had shoved him out of the room and locked the door so that he could be alone.

And to top it all off, he thought as he shot a glance at the clock, he would now be late for his detention with Snape if he didn't hurry.

Forcing himself to his feet with a groan, Draco unlocked the door and stormed through it, giving deadly glares to anyone who dared to look at him. He'd tried changing robes, but found that the twins' enchantment was somehow anchored to his skin, not his clothing; the new robes just acquired the red and gold hues, too, and a new tie acquired the lion. And nothing at all could be done to restore his hair.

And Harry was gone, too, instead of being there for Draco to glare at.

It just was not fair.

Draco stomped to Snape's offices in a huff, and knocked firmly on the door, and stood there with arms folded, waiting.

Snape opened the door. He looked at Draco with the same deeply uninterested gaze he'd used during Potions, as though nothing Draco did or said or wore could possibly matter, and said, "You are late by two minutes. Come in."

Draco stamped inside and then whirled around as his professor shut the door. Snape at least knew certain inalienable truths about, among other things, Draco's feelings for Harry. He might deny them, but he knew them, and that made him safe to yell at in a way that Harry wasn't. He also didn't make Draco hurt quite so much when he

snapped back. "Why didn't you do something to the Weasleys?" he yelled, waving his arms. "Two of them hexed one of your Slytherins right in the Great Hall, and you didn't so much as take off five points!"

Snape merely watched him, head on one side, body still. It crept in on Draco, distantly, that he had never seen his professor so devoid of movement. It reminded him of the way he had seen his father once or twice, when—

When he had been sitting in his study, contemplating the Dark Mark on his arm.

Draco swallowed and took a step backward. The indignant bubble he had lived in all day popped, and he realized that he stood in a room with someone infinitely more dangerous than Snape had ever been. Snape's rage had always been low, he had almost never raised his voice, but now it was cold, too.

"I will not take off points," Snape began at last, after five more moments of silence in which Draco could clearly hear his heartbeat, "when the Weasleys have done a service to the school in chiding the idiocy of one of my Slytherins." The emphasis he gave that one word was icy; there was no other term for it. Draco felt his cheeks pale in fear, rather than flush. "No, Draco, you must learn better. You will learn better. I will undertake your instruction myself."

"What do you mean?" Draco whispered.

Snape took a single gliding step forward, though it wasn't really a glide, not the way Draco had always thought of his professor's movement in the past. Instead, he simply disappeared from one place and appeared in another, it seemed, suddenly, and much closer to Draco. Draco fought the nervous urge to shuffle back, but he could not combat the urge to swallow. Snape studied him with black, flat, dead eyes, the way that Draco thought a spider might contemplate a fly in its web.

"Your behavior embarrasses our House," said Snape. "Your obsession weakens you. Your carelessness could endanger Harry."

For these reasons, and others, I am going to make sure that you change, Draco.”

He abruptly turned and strode out of the room, through a seldom-used door that Draco knew led to his library of books he did not want students come on detentions to see. Draco stood there, dazed, blinking, for a moment, and then followed.

Snape had already selected a book from the shelf, and he tossed it underhanded to Draco. Draco caught it, and stared at it.

Medicamenta Meatus Verus, it read. Draco’s mind translated the title without really thinking about it. Potions of the True Path.

“What is this?” he asked, blinking at Snape. He’d thought of some forbidden Potions or Dark Arts book when Snape had first mentioned that he was going to change Draco’s behavior, but he didn’t recognize this title, and he knew all the famous ones.

“A test,” said Snape. “And a binding. And a project for you, to lead you out of the shadows you insist on putting yourself in, into light.” His mouth twitched with something too chill and faint to be called a smile. “Or into true darkness, if you wish to think of it that way.”

As though it had taken Snape’s words to let him become aware of it, Draco felt the magic of the book then. It sang beneath his fingertips, purring power that was watching him and aware of him, but not going to do anything to him until he opened it.

He opened it.

Draco watched in terrified amazement as his fingers skimmed past several pages, riffling them, until they settled onto one in particular. It felt—right as his fingers came down on that page, and the magic was purring loud enough to make the book vibrate now. Draco looked at the title of the potion.

He felt his face flush, but he shook his head. “That isn’t—this potion doesn’t exist,” he whispered. “It can’t possibly.”

“And why not?” Snape had moved forward so that he loomed over Draco.

“Because my father would have found it, if so.” Draco stared at the page, and felt the scars tear off an old, old wound. “He was furious when I turned ten and I still hadn’t shown any signs of being sympathetic enough to his own magic to become his magical heir.” Draco could still hear his father’s words, yelling, the one time he had ever seen Lucius lose control. There has been a magical heir in the Malfoy line for the last thirteen generations, and that will not stop now! But nothing could be done about it; either Draco’s magic was enough like his father’s to receive Lucius’s abilities and knowledge on his deathbed and showed signs of being so early in life, or it was not and did not, and Draco’s was the latter. Lucius had grown resigned to a late manifestation in the years that followed, but never quite given up hope, though Draco knew his hopes dipped lower and lower every year. “I—this isn’t—he would have learned of this potion if it were real. This is a hoax, a trick.” He turned to look up at Snape, his eyes narrowed, his brain feeling free of fog for the first time since he had realized he was in love with Harry. “Why are you playing a trick on me?”

Snape stood looking into his eyes for a long moment. Draco watched his face tighten. Then he nodded firmly at the book.

“It is real, I promise you,” said Snape. “As for why it is not more widely-known? The author of this particular book was a brilliant Potions Master, but not regarded as such by her colleagues, because she did not achieve her results in any traditional way. In bitterness and revenge, she recorded her finest discoveries here and hid them away from the world. My—inheritor was lucky to include the book.”

Draco regarded the potion for a long moment. Then he said, “Sir? Have you used it?”

“I was unable to.” Snape sounded entirely unemotional. “The potion relies on purity of blood as well as sympathy of magic. My mother was pureblood. My father was a Muggle.”

Draco felt his mouth drop open. He had not guessed it, although he had known, in the back of his mind, that Snape did not come of an established pureblood line. After all, there was no family named Snape. But he had not thought that—well, that Snape's blood was tainted quite that recently.

He stared at Snape. Snape stared back.

Draco was reminded, abruptly, that Snape, tainted or not, was a powerful wizard, the third most powerful in the school after Dumbledore and Harry, and also a Legilimens. Draco wasn't sure what Snape had learned from looking him in the eye, but he found that he didn't want to match stares with him any more.

His hands clamped on the book, and the potions recipe. That wrinkled the page, so he smoothed it out again, frantically. Already, he could feel a new, burning ambition stirring within him.

This potion...if this potion really could let me bring back one of my ancestors' ghosts whose magic was sympathetic to mine, then I could become a Malfoy magical heir. Not Father's, but still an heir of our family.

And that would open horizons that Draco had known would close to him when he reached the age of seventeen without manifesting his sympathy to his father's magic and Lucius could deny the obvious no longer. He would be shut out of most formal alliance meetings. He would not be considered as a potential business partner by some of the pickier purebloods, in Europe and elsewhere. He would be unable to achieve some magical training that he might want.

He might be considered an unworthy partner for a powerful witch or wizard.

He looked up at Snape, though he didn't meet his eyes. "It will take a lot of research," he whispered.

Snape inclined his head. "Research into your family background, into your own magic, into your ancestors' magic, to learn who might be most sympathetic to you," he said. "Research into birth and marriage

records, to make sure that the ancestor you choose is pureblooded. Research into the beginning stages of necromancy, that you might summon the ghost to you. I know. The potion took me two years to achieve when I tried it out of simple curiosity as to what would happen.”

Draco blew out his breath. “I’ll achieve it by the end of the school year,” he said. “I promise, Professor Snape.”

“Good,” said Snape, still sounding unmoved. “I should like my book back.”

Draco turned and hurried out of the room, the book clasped to his heart. His brain seemed sharp, clear, whirling up all sorts of ideas about what subjects he would like to look up in the library. His imagination painted clear, new pictures of the future. It was all he could do to keep from laughing aloud.

He had something to do.

Snape watched Draco go, his head on one side. He felt as calm as the mask he had presented to the boy. So was his mind, for that matter. Harry or Dumbledore might look at the surface of his thoughts and see nothing but order, focused on potions research or ways to best train Harry to survive the Death Eaters.

Of course they would. The real agitation in his thoughts lay far below the surface, at a level he had never reached but once. During the year when he was spying for the Order of the Phoenix under Voldemort, he had lived on this level, where driving determination and absolute clear knowledge of what it would mean to fail had made him unstoppable.

There, he had gone entirely cold.

He could remember his mother’s first lessons if he but closed his eyes. In many ways, his mother had been like Lily Potter, though she had taught him lessons that turned out not to do warping damage to his brain, but to be utter, bitter truth.

Darkness came before light. The Dark wizards all say that, Severus. But they forget the whole truth. There is one thing older than darkness. The cold came before even the dark did.

When you must survive, go cold, not hot. It will keep you alive.

And he had, and it kept him alive. And now he had again, since he had realized what Harry's abduction meant and what kind of firestorm Harry was calling, and what Draco's obsession was and what it meant.

This coldness would save all three of them, and anyone else it was necessary to save, because the proper people were not doing what they should have been doing.

Snape stalked into his office. His thoughts went on turning in the darkness, glittering cold wheels, born of snowflakes and bred of icicles, shining and dancing, dancing.

Medicamenta Meatus Verus was indeed a very valuable book, one his mother had acquired in one of her untraceable ways, and Snape had told Draco the truth about its author. Scorned by other Potions Masters, proud, embittered, Melissa Prince had written all her knowledge down and then never attempted to see her book get the kind of attention it deserved.

But she had also worked an enchantment into the book itself, one that she let cost her life, and one that traveled into any new copy of the book that was made, by hand or magically. The book chose the right potion for the person who held it, the right path. And once that person began the necessary research, a binding compulsion would link to their mind and their will, not letting them abandon the project until it was finished. It was Melissa Prince's one way of insuring that her legacy would live on.

The potion it had chosen for Snape when he first opened it had let him see his soul. Since then, he had lived with no illusions about himself. It had been rather shattering at first, but it was necessary, and it was another thing that had let him survive.

Draco would follow the path of this potion, the one Snape had thought the book would choose for the boy, until he finished it. And he would grow both new powers and his own life. The boy had mentioned an interest in history. Snape thought what he would discover in the history of his own family would be quite, quite interesting.

The fact that he had laid a compulsion on the boy was not something Harry would have done, nor Dumbledore, and possibly not something Draco would have wanted if Snape had asked him about it.

Snape, gone cold, did not care. No one else was seeing what harm Draco's obsession could do. So Snape would do something about it. No one else would. Besides, the boy was already struggling under the remnants of a compulsion, as Snape had seen when he looked into his mind—one that Harry's brother had put on him last year. It was sunken deeply into Draco's mind now, almost part of the fabric of his thoughts, unable to be plucked out without doing considerable damage to his sanity. That compulsion had made him think about his feelings for Harry, constantly, and was probably part of the reason that he was going so mad now. Answering a compulsion with a compulsion, when the second one would ultimately lead to freedom, was something that Snape had no objection to doing.

As for Harry...

Snape's eyes narrowed. He had watched, from the shadows, as Harry threw Sectumsempra at Bellatrix Lestrange. He had not interfered. He did not wish to. His new, cold temper insisted that he keep a watch on the boy to see how he would handle the situation, and he had seen. Then he had spoken with him afterward.

He had panicked before. He had attempted to protect the boy from every danger possible. That was not possible.

So he would not panic, not anymore. He would do what was necessary instead: train Harry....

And go on the offensive.

Snape turned. In the corner of his office, three potions simmered, all of them new, and original to him. One was clear in color, one the thick off-white of parchment, one yellow and red and lit by a candle floating on a mimicry of a lily pad on the surface.

Snape narrowed his eyes at them, and felt nothing but quiet satisfaction on the surface, while underneath it—far underneath it—the cold lashed like a scorpion made of ice.

I am done playing games.

Harry tried to crane his neck to see what Draco was reading. Without looking up, Draco leaned away from him.

Harry sighed and fidgeted with his toast, not feeling hungry. He hadn't really felt hungry ever since the beginning of breakfast. Today was their first Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and Harry was still nervous around Moody, his reputation for hating Dark magic, and his silver collar.

Of course, the real source of his tension was Draco.

Draco had spoken little to him in the past week. Oh, sometimes he gave Harry an accusing glare (as he had when Harry finally found the spell combination that rid him of the twins' ridiculous coloring), and sometimes he entered an animated discussion of class or the mysterious, hush-hush secret that had the professors all talking in odd clumps in the corridors. But mostly, he kept to himself, and read, and just shrugged when Harry attempted to talk to him.

It was putting Harry a bit off his food.

He looked boredly up at the ceiling as the post owls swooped in, and then blinked. An owl was actually making for his table, carrying something for him. He caught it on his outstretched arm, and felt a faint shimmer of a web, gone too swiftly for him to make anything out. He frowned. He would have to investigate the bindings on the owls someday.

He drew out the letter from the twine, and recognized the Headmaster's writing at once.

Harry,

I would like you to come see me at eight o'clock this evening. It is past time that we discussed what your being vates might mean. My password is "Treacle Tart."

Albus Dumbledore.

Harry shot a glance at the high table, not sure the Headmaster was serious, but received a look in return that didn't twinkle or make false promises. Harry inclined his head, and fed the owl a bit of his toast. It wasn't doing him any good right now anyway.

Again, his glance went back to Draco. Silly as it was, he felt as though he were missing a limb with Draco so far away, even if it was only in mind.

Now that's silly, Harry thought to himself in derision, and stood to get ready for Defense Against the Dark Arts

Harry raised his eyebrows when he entered the Defense classroom. Every other professor he'd had had already been there, trying to settle in without making it look as though he were settling in, giving the room and the desk dubious glances. Lockhart had already arranged his photographs on the walls that first day, to wink and gleam and grin at the students. Remus had been ready with his illusions. Even Quirrell had at least tried to look mysterious, even though his trembling hands, his stutter, and the ridiculous turban that concealed Voldemort on the back of his head had severely undercut that image.

Moody was nowhere in sight.

"Think he ran away when he heard he had to teach you?" Draco whispered behind him.

Harry, grateful that Draco was speaking to him again even if it was to tease, turned around and raised an eyebrow at him. "Or you, maybe."

“But you’re more powerful, and you got the Hounds arrested,” Draco pointed out, as he took his seat and got his book out. Harry tried again to catch a glimpse of the cover of the book he was reading, but Draco slid it deftly out of sight. He met Harry’s eyes, and his voice grew sharp. “I think that teaching you would be enough to wear anyone out. Sometimes you’re blind to what’s right in front of your face.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, but didn’t respond. They were hovering on the verge of moving from teasing to true argument, and the best reply he could give—which would involve Moody’s capture of Lucius at one of the scenes of his crimes—would hurt Draco too much. Harry sat down and faced forward.

This time, he noticed the faint shimmer in front of the desk, the mark of a Disillusionment Charm. Harry tensed and called his magic, but waited. It might be a threat, but it might also be a trick.

Just as the first of the students began to relax and complain about their professor’s absence, Moody burst into existence, shedding the Disillusionment Charm and leaning in front of the desk. The girl who’d complained, Susan Bones from Hufflepuff, promptly fainted, sliding down under the chair with a thump. Harry winced and kept one eye on Moody as he checked on her. She seemed to be fine.

“Do you see that?” Moody snarled at them, pacing back and forth in front of the desk with harsh clumps of his wooden leg. “I was in the room all the time, and no one noticed.” For a moment, his magical eye alit on Harry, but it didn’t stay there. It came back to Susan, who was just starting to sit up. “CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” Moody roared, causing the girl to shriek and half-faint again. This time, two of her friends caught her and helped her back into her seat.

Moody turned around fast in front of the desk. Harry could see the gleam of the silver collar around his neck, and the flask at his hip which contained what he said was his “preferred drink.” He came to rest with his wand pointing at Harry.

I don’t trust him, Regulus snarled in his head.

Why not? Harry asked, though with the fierce, scarred face staring directly at him and the wand pointing at his face, he could see why not.

He uses too much of his reputation, said Regulus. He's acting too much like Moody.

Overacting?

No, he's too good for that. He acts too much like Moody, Regulus repeated.

Regulus, you can't act too much like yourself.

Yes, you can. You did it when you were still mooning after that impossible brother of yours.

"Mr. Potter," Moody growled, catching his attention. "Do you think that are proficient in the Dark Arts?"

Harry could feel the attention of the class becoming pinned to him like a butterfly to a corkboard. Zacharias Smith in particular had a scorching stare. Harry remembered, suddenly, that his family was Light. That particular fact had never mattered much before. Now it did.

I'll have to pay attention to the allegiances of families besides the ones in Slytherin, he thought, and answered Moody.

"Which definition of Dark Arts are you using, sir?"

Moody tapped his wand on his wooden leg. "Stop dodging and answer the question, Potter," he barked.

"I can't until I know which definition you're using," said Harry. He felt his skin flinching and crawling under the stares. Yes, he'd got a lot of stares the day after Skeeter's article, too, but those he had expected and could handle. These were unexpected, and decidedly unwelcome.

“You’re dodging like a Death Eater,” said Moody, limping a step closer. “Are you a Death Eater, Potter?”

Harry lifted his left arm, never taking his eyes from Moody, and tilted it so that his robe sleeve slid back, exposing his blank left forearm.

Moody snorted. “All well and good to have no Dark Mark, but how do you prove that you aren’t a Death Eater?”

“You don’t,” said Harry. He was forcibly reminded of his interrogation by Fudge, when the man had refused to recognize basic logic. “You can’t prove a negative. If someone accuses me of being a Death Eater, the proof is up to them.” He leaned forward. “How would you prove that I am, Professor Moody?”

“The use of Dark Arts would answer for itself, I should think.” Moody still stared at him intently, no trace of a smile on his face.

“But lots of people use Dark Arts,” said Harry, and kept his eyes wide and innocent, his voice breathless. He didn’t want to expose this, but, on the other hand, he didn’t want a term of constant harassment by Moody, either—or a whole school year of it. Better to slap him down, now and hard. And look, Snape, I’m not even using any Dark Arts spells to do it! “I know that you used Dark Arts when you wanted to capture Death Eaters, Auror Moody. There are rumors that you used Imperio on a few of them who absolutely refused to cooperate, and the Ministry granted you a special exemption to use it. Yet it’s still Dark Arts, isn’t it?” He blinked at Moody with the guileless expression of a child. “Or does a Ministry exemption change the nature of magic?”

Zacharias Smith chuckled. Moody’s eyes moved briefly to him, then came back to Harry, resting on him with feral intensity.

He hates you, said Regulus.

Can you reach into his mind, then?

No. But I’m reading his expression. He hates you, Harry.

Or he hates the Dark Arts, and hates that a student can walk freely around Hogwarts after practicing them. Harry studied Moody's face, and his collar. You were the one who told me that Rosier was mad for telling me to distrust Moody, that he would never yield to Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

There was a long, deep pause. Then, even as Regulus sighed, Moody said, "Well done, Potter. Five points to Slytherin."

Harry blinked. "What, sir?"

Moody nodded at him, then spun around to address the class again. "Constant vigilance!" he shouted. "You have to be prepared for an attack at any time—magical, physical, or verbal. Potter was ready for this attack. The rest of you should be, too." He took a long step forward. "Smith, if I told you to tell me what was so funny about Mr. Potter's statement, could you do it?"

Harry let out a long, shaky breath.

I don't trust him, Regulus growled in his head.

Yes, we've established that, Harry thought in exasperation, and sat back to watch Moody rip into the other students. His method of teaching, if that was all it was, was really no more brutal than Snape's, though Snape's voice was usually lower when he did it.

If that was all it was.

It was true that a few Hufflepuffs darted nervous glances at Harry when Moody wasn't looking, but Harry was fairly sure of them. Justin, Ernie, and Hannah were good sorts. Susan knew him less well, but her friends could calm her from thinking the worst of him. Zacharias was—well, not a friend, not really, but logical and skeptical and prone to attacking all things, which would include Moody's teaching methods, with ferocious energy. Any plan that Moody might have to make them afraid of Harry was not going to work.

And not with anyone else either, hopefully.

I just wonder if he could have something to do with finding Voldemort, said Regulus, abruptly.

Harry blinked. What?

Finding Voldemort, said Regulus, as if Harry were stupid. They're searching the Black Forest for him right now. They don't have much time. He knows they're close, but they haven't found him yet.

Harry sat up slowly, though, when Moody glanced at him, he pretended the motion was a grab for his book. Regulus, what are you talking about?

Regulus abruptly stopped talking. Um.

Harry dipped his quill into his inkwell, and waited.

I, um. I, um, have a connection with the older form of Voldemort, still, since he tortured me for so long, said Regulus. I, um. Have been following it occasionally and trying to find out what he's doing?

Harry bit down on his lip, and mastered the temptation to curse out loud. Connor had taught him to master it, last year. Is that where you've been the times that I couldn't reach you?

Um. Some of them?

Harry hissed.

You don't understand! Regulus abruptly wailed. I feel so useless, so helpless, without a body, and you heard Dumbledore last year, the Dark Lord has a lot of trouble recognizing passive links to his mind, so I thought I would follow mine, and exploit it, and so far I haven't learned much, but—

If you would just let me tell Narcissa about the wards and lower them for her, then you could have your body back!

I don't want her to come in here, said Regulus, and sulked at him.

Harry kept himself from hurling the inkwell across the room, but it was a near thing. Promise me that you won't go hunting down your connection to the older Voldemort any more.

Regulus left.

Harry mostly resisted the temptation to bury his head in his hands and groan aloud because Moody had rounded on him again.

"Treacle Tart," Harry told the gargoyle outside the Headmaster's office, and it jumped out of the way. Harry shook his head as he stepped onto the moving staircase. Only a few months ago, he would have felt deeply intimidated and nervous, and would have wanted Snape with him.

That was then, and this was now, when he was mostly impatient and wondered what in the world Dumbledore could possibly want.

The staircase left him outside the Headmaster's door. Harry composed himself enough to knock, and in the moments it took Dumbledore to answer, reached after Regulus. It was no use. He'd never really been able to sense the actual connection that Regulus used to reach his mind, only whether he was there or not, and he had no way of calling Sirius's stupid brother back.

"Come in."

Harry pushed the door open and stopped, blinking. Dumbledore's office had changed in the months since Harry had seen it last. Fawkes's perch was still in its place, and the Sword of Gryffindor hung on the wall in a glass case, but the shelves were now mostly filled with books instead of odd silver devices. Dumbledore had several locked cabinets along the walls now, but one of them, full of Pensieves, was open. Dumbledore's desk was loaded with a single huge Pensieve, the silver liquid shimmering near the brim and almost running out of the bowl.

Dumbledore turned around from examining the Pensieve cabinet, his face a mask of calm. "Ah, my dear boy. Come in."

“We were going to discuss what being vates means,” said Harry, feeling that he should establish at once what he was there for. He had told Snape where he was going, and received one long, inscrutable look from dark eyes, before Snape had nodded his permission. Then he had turned to tend one of the three potions bubbling in cauldrons at the back of the room, none of which Harry recognized. Snape’s strangeness, like Draco’s, was putting him a bit off his food. “Sir,” he added, when he found that Dumbledore’s gaze was resting on him a bit too heavily.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes. Have you heard of Falco Parkinson, Harry?”

Harry, caught by surprise, blinked for a moment, then said, “Yes. He was Headmaster of Hogwarts at one time, and tried to negotiate with the magical creatures, but was harmed by them for it. He also supposedly tried to be vates.”

“He did,” said Dumbledore simply. He covered the Pensieve with one hand, turning it so that Harry could see part of the long title carved on it. With Falco Parkinson, it said. “And he was my mentor.”

Harry blinked at Dumbledore. “I thought he lived before your time, sir.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “He lived much longer than is generally supposed. Sit down, please, Harry.”

Harry took a chair in front of the desk, staring with wary fascination at the Pensieve. He wanted to see what was in it, but, on the other hand, Dumbledore had used Pensieves to trick him before.

“He became interested in being vates while still a young man, when he felt his power growing in him,” said Dumbledore, tapping the edge of the Pensieve with one finger. It made a ringing sound. “You understand that a vates must be a powerful wizard, Harry? And why?”

“Because otherwise he wouldn’t have the power necessary to break the webs,” Harry supplied.

Dumbledore winced. "Ah. Yes. That is something I thought you might have got wrong."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "It's not something I made up, sir. It's something that Dobby and Fawkes told me."

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "I cannot speak for Fawkes. I believe him to be a creature of the highest good, Harry, and I wish that I still had him with me. But as for the house elves...they have been bound for a long, long time, Harry. Do you believe that one of them would be above lying, if he managed to have enough strength of mind to think about it, in order to gain his freedom?"

Harry hated the tiny seed of doubt that sprang up in him. He tried to crush it before it could come to full blossom. "If you think that a powerful wizard has to be vates for another reason, sir, then show me what it is."

Dumbledore nodded and removed his hand from the top of the Pensieve. "We will enter this together, Harry, so that you need fear no tricks from me."

Harry leaned forward and put his head beneath the surface of the Pensieve, all the time watching as Dumbledore's beard descended beside him. And then the silver liquid closed over him, and flipped him around twice, and rolled him over, and he found himself standing in a small meadow.

The meadow was at the bottom of a hollow, a spot in the land shaped like two cupped hands. Harry found himself breathing more deeply, as though to take in the scent of the air, though he knew it was only a memory. The air around him sparkled faintly, with a sheen Harry had before seen only in water, and the flowers were a kind he was sure he had never studied, so brilliantly scarlet that the sunlight flinched back from them. More, a faint, subtle song seemed to be coming from the side.

Harry turned, and found a man who must be a younger Albus Dumbledore, from the ridiculous robes he was wearing, standing next

to a far older wizard. He radiated such power that Harry understood at once where the sheen and the scent and the song in the air came from. This was a Light Lord of considerable strength.

Falco Parkinson's face was mapped with intricate lines, some of them wrinkles that didn't look natural to Harry. He leaned on a staff of white oak wood, and his robes were twined with glittering silver sigils that Harry thought were letters, though not ones he knew. His eyes were a piercing green, his hair the silver of the sigils, and flowing down to nearly meet the middle of his back. He was speaking, in a melodious voice that added to the song in the air. Harry crept forward to listen to him.

"...that is why being vates is so hard, Albus, why so many of us cannot do it. We keep trying to find ways around the ultimate solution to ease relations between wizards and the magical creatures, but there is no other path."

"And what is the solution, sir?" Dumbledore's voice was soft and respectful. Harry blinked. He had known, of course, that Dumbledore had been different when he was younger, but somehow, seeing and hearing it brought it home to him with more force than he had thought existed.

"The sacrifice of magic." Falco moved an arm, and one of the flowers rose from the ground into the air, turning. Its roots extended to link around the Light Lord's arm, and it began to sing. Falco gazed at it sadly. "Such power as I use right now, to make this little flower sing and grow elsewhere than the soil, could be used to content the unicorns, to give them a gift that would make the loss of their freedom seem as nothing. But in giving that up, I would sacrifice some of my magic, like cutting off one of my own limbs. That power would never return to me."

Harry blinked, and felt light-headed. He saw from the younger Dumbledore's face that he likely felt the same way.

"And that is why so many wizards trying to be vates have failed?" he breathed.

“It is.” Falco Parkinson turned his head and fixed Dumbledore with keen eyes. “They tried to break the webs, and of course, nothing but destruction and chaos results from that. They tried to use compulsion on wizards to make them free the magical creatures, and became Dark Lords. They tried to do anything but give up their own magic. And who can blame them? What wizard would want to do that?” His gaze went back to the flower, his expression sad. “And even then, one wizard’s power is not enough to content every magical creature in the world. How would he choose which ones to content and set in a trance of magic before his ability to go on sacrificing himself ran out?”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “I understand, sir. I would still—like to try. But I will no longer make it my life’s ambition.”

Falco smiled at him. “Good boy.”

The scene abruptly dissolved around Harry, and he pulled his head back from the Pensieve, blinking. He sat hard in his chair, and thought about that. Before him, Dumbledore sat back in his own chair and watched him intently.

Harry looked up. “I’ll still have to talk with the magical creatures about this, sir, and see why their story was so different. But thank you for telling me.” Even though I don’t think it’s the whole truth. “That’s another definition of vates.”

It was. And Harry could already feel the unease that Falco Parkinson had talked about. How would he make decisions like that? Could he choose to free the house elves and unicorns and centaurs, but leave the bindings on creatures like the Runespoors in the Forbidden Forest?

Then, abruptly, he tensed, and felt like slapping a hand against his forehead.

I’m an idiot. I freed the Dementors simply by shredding their web, without sacrificing my magic.

He brought his eyes back to Dumbledore’s face. I don’t think that he’s telling me the whole truth. I’ll have to see.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "Was there anything else that you wanted to tell me?"

"Not for right now, Harry." Dumbledore nodded towards the door. "I would like you to meet with me throughout the term, so that you might hear more about what it means to be vates. I have other memories to show you."

I'm sure you do. Harry nodded once, said, "Thank you, sir," and then turned and departed with a swish of his robes.

Albus sat back and gave a little sigh as the door closed behind Harry. They had got through a meeting without threats. That was already a vast improvement over their relationship from last year.

And now he had his distraction in place, the hook baited and set, and Harry had taken it.

Either way, whatever he discovered, he should be distracted enough to stop pursuing wizarding world politics for a time. He would have to speak with magical creatures and discover what being vates truly meant. Or he would have to ponder sacrificing his own magic. Knowing Harry, knowing the way Harry had been raised, Albus was sure that he would ultimately make the decision to give up his own power if it meant freedom for someone else.

And that gave them another valuable advantage. If Harry became magically weaker, fewer wizards would pay any attention to him, and he could do fewer things against the way that things should be done.

Magical power had been the ultimate trump card in wizarding politics for the last several hundred years, at least. Albus knew his appointment as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot had at least as much to do with his strength as with his status as a follower of the Light or the defeater of Grindelwald. Many people had followed Tom not because of his ideals or his Dark magic, but because he was a Dark Lord and they could feel his power.

Harry was a wild card right now, far too dangerous. Reducing his power could only be a good thing.

And if he is the Boy-Who-Lived—not just the one who deflected Tom’s Killing Curse, but the savior we need?

Albus shook his head. The prophecy had been quite clear on that point (if on nothing else). The savior would defeat Tom with a “power the Dark Lord knows not.” Harry had no powers, at the moment, that Tom did not know, and several that he knew rather intimately. Reducing his magical power would do nothing disastrous to the war effort, and probably rather a lot of good, as it would start forcing Harry to think before he acted, and develop his capacity for love instead of power. And the other families, both Dark and Light, would not be so eager to follow him.

Albus knew the answer to Voldemort was love of the wizarding world, not magic. It had to be. It was the way he had defeated Grindelwald.

He turned, once again, to study the latest letters from France and Bulgaria.

He planned to keep Harry distracted with a series of “discoveries” about being vates. But if that did not work...

Well, another distraction should.

Chapter Fourteen: My Responses Have Claws

Harry considered, later, that he had had no responsibility for the world going mad that particular morning, even though it came about as consequences of his actions. He was not the one who had chosen to go mad at breakfast, for one thing.

He had just asked Draco whether this secret project he was engaged in was like the project last year, when Draco had been studying compulsion to understand how Harry's magic affected him. Draco had simply given him a harsh look, and said, "Odd as it seems, Harry, not every thought I think comes back to you."

Harry winced and sat back on the bench. He thought of arguing, of protesting, but the same thing that had kept him silent for the last week and a half choked him now. He trusted Draco, trusted him to be honest about whatever was bothering him. The fact that he was keeping silent now must mean he didn't want to talk about it. And Harry would only anger him further by pressing.

He forced himself to look away from Draco, and so he saw the white owl enter the Great Hall. It was startling, because Hedwig was the only snowy owl at the school. Harry stared, and then realized this magnificent pale bird was not an owl after all, but a gyrfalcon.

It circled low over the Slytherin table and then coasted down onto the wood in front of him, every feather on its belly and breast ruffled. It stuck out one leg, snapping its head around to glare at Vince, who had started to touch its tail. Vince hastily sat back and raised his hands in defense.

Harry shook his head and removed the letter from the gyrfalcon's leg. It was a brilliant red, and he wasn't surprised when the Howler exploded in front of him. He was surprised that he didn't recognize the voice yelling at him.

"WE THOUGHT THE MINISTRY HAD BETTER CONTROL OF CHILDREN THESE DAYS! WE THOUGHT THAT A POWERFUL WIZARD SUCH AS YOURSELF, HARRY POTTER, WOULD KNOW

BETTER THAN TO DESTROY A TREASURE SO OLD AND SACRED!"

Harry blinked. Not only did he not recognize the voice, he had no idea what the hell it was yelling about. That was unusual.

"WE WERE SERVING THE CAUSE OF THE LIGHT IN LENDING OUR ARTIFACTS TO MINISTER FUDGE! YOU HAD NO RIGHT TO DESTROY OUR SPHERE SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU BELIEVED THE MINISTER WAS ABOUT TO DRAIN YOUR MAGIC! DRAINING MAGIC IS WHAT THE SPHERE WAS CREATED FOR! HAVE YOU NO TASTE? NO DISCERNMENT?"

Harry smiled. Now he knew who the Howler was from—the Starrises, the Light wizarding family who had lent the silver sphere that had nearly drained his magic to Fudge. He kept his eyes fixed on the Howler, and caught a glimpse of the seal as the envelope flapped and jumped in agitation. Sure enough, it bore a device that was unfamiliar to him, but looked as though it could be the seal of a Light family named Starrise: a thick half-circle with a rising sun at the bottom of it, its rays reaching out to touch the upper bar of the circle, and five stars scattered among the rays.

The Howler finished, and ripped itself to pieces. Harry shook his head in amusement. The gyrfalcon sat where it was, staring at him. Harry raised a brow. That was a surprise. Most owls delivering Howlers simply flew off again, under the impression that their recipient didn't want to reply.

"No response," he told the gyrfalcon.

The great bird hissed, and moved one talon as though it would slash at him. Harry coolly moved his hand out of the way and thought, Ventus.

A blast of wind caught the gyrfalcon and blew it off the table. It managed to right itself in a few wingbeats, then caught the wind and used it to its benefit, screeching in indignation as it rose to the level of the windows.

Harry went back to his breakfast, conscious of the stares and amused by them, too, instead of sickened. He was too busy coming up with the perfect response to Starrise. He nodded when he thought he'd composed it. He would send it out with Hedwig when he had a free period that evening.

"Aren't you angry?"

Harry blinked and looked at Draco. He'd lowered his book for once and was staring hard at Harry.

"Not really," said Harry. "I didn't realize they would be so angry at me, and I certainly didn't think they'd try to make a public scene out of it, but one has to expect to make enemies in politics." He cocked his head. "Why?"

"They had no right to do that," said Draco, his voice cold and still, much the same as Snape's voice had been lately. Harry nibbled his lip thoughtfully, and wondered if he should venture a comment on the change in Draco's behavior. He still trusted Draco and Snape to be there if he needed them to be, but he supposed something must have changed. Perhaps it would be worth it, after all, to ask.

"Draco?"

Draco looked at him, most of his mind apparently still occupied with the insult that Starrise had dealt Harry.

"Did I do something wrong?" Harry asked. "Is that why you've been spending so much time on Potions research lately, and mostly when we do speak, we argue?"

Draco's face closed off again, and he jerked the book up in front of his face. "I told you, Harry," he said. "Not every thought I think comes back to you. And I can be concerned about you, and about Potions research, at the same time. I know you might not think it possible, but it is."

Harry nodded. "All right." He did feel a brief stab of hurt, but he found the wound and healed it quickly. Draco just wanted some time alone.

And Harry had been selfish in thinking that the reason must have something to do with him. Of course it did not. He should trust in Draco more. Every time before when they had endured something that might have broken their friendship, it had survived, and they had been the stronger for it. He would just wait, patiently, until Draco was ready to speak with him again, and let Draco know that he was here for him if he needed Harry.

He started to stand. They had Defense Against the Dark Arts in a few minutes, and Harry didn't feel much like remaining in breakfast.

A group of Ravenclaws passed the table, chattering. Harry nodded to Cho, and saw a faint movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned in that direction.

"Caeco!"

Harry reacted instinctively to the Blinding Curse, snapping up Protego in front of him, but replaced it with Haurio a moment later. The Shield Charm would bounce the hex, and Harry didn't want anyone else getting blinded in his place. He absorbed the magic into the jade-green shield around his hand, and then looked up to see who had hexed him.

Gorgon, a hefty student whom he had trounced a few times last year for bullying Luna, was forcing his way out of the middle of the Ravenclaw group, tears streaking his face.

"You got my uncle arrested, you bastard!" he screamed at Harry, and lifted his wand. "Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry rolled under the table, since the hex had come in so low that he couldn't move his hand to get in the way. He heard a few short screams, and then someone else pulled a wand and incanted back. Harry grimaced. He didn't want this to turn into a full-blown fight between Ravenclaws and Slytherins. Gorgon's grief for his uncle Gamaliel was private, and should remain so.

Someone else shrieked, and someone else incanted back, before he could roll out from under the table. Luckily, Harry had the perfect spell

on his lips. He'd learned it the year before he came to Hogwarts, when Lily had warned him that he might someday have to fight single combats with any enemies who weren't Voldemort (he was Connor's alone to conquer). A spell that would insure that he and his opponent could fight alone was the perfect thing to learn.

He stood and extended a hand towards Gorgon. "Privilegium!"

The spell erupted from around him, tearing a precise line in the floor that made splinters of stone and dust hover in the air. A tendril of red light grabbed Gorgon and dragged him forward, stumbling. Meanwhile, the spell finished carving the dueling ring and shoved everyone else out of it. Rude, perhaps, but at least this way, no one else could intrude, Harry thought. A curtain of hazy air then snapped up, exactly following the line of the carved ring, shutting them away from the sight of anyone outside it.

Harry bowed his head slightly to the stunned Gorgon and drew his own cypress wand from his pocket. A duel was a duel, an old and private and sacred thing, and he would not use wandless magic in it, even though he had used it to cast the original spell. "Shall we?" he asked.

Gorgon just stared at him.

Harry rolled his eyes, and felt a brief stab of anger and impatience that Gorgon was evidently unwilling to take his grievance this far. Or maybe he just didn't know what was going on.

"We're dueling now," Harry explained. "No one else can interfere. I thought that would be best, as we can keep from hurting anyone."

Gorgon went on staring. There was fear in his eyes now. Harry frowned and shook his head. Why would he have started this when he didn't think that he could finish it?

Oh. Of course. He must have been carried away by the heat of the moment. Well, that happens to everyone.

Harry bowed again. Gorgon, though still seeming dazed, bowed back. Then he stuck his wand forward, as though desperation were giving him courage, and shouted, "Tarantallegra!"

Harry let the hex get through, and danced a brief jig before he whispered, "Finite Incantatem." That ended the spell, and he eyed Gorgon for a moment. He wanted to end the duel, but not so soon. That would only be a barb to sting Gorgon's pride, and it might mean that he would just attack Harry again at a later date, perhaps with a spell that could seriously damage him. Prolong it through one round, then. "Rictusempra!"

The magic surged through his wand, familiar and yet moving oddly; Harry realized how strange his wand had become in his grasp. The spell hit Gorgon, and he began to giggle uncontrollably. Harry blinked. He hadn't expected the Tickling Charm to be one that a sixth-year Ravenclaw couldn't throw off.

It was, though, and at last Harry realized the duel wouldn't be able to continue. Stung pride or not, Gorgon was going to lose quickly.

"Finite Incantatem. Expelliarmus," Harry muttered, resigned, and Gorgon's wand tore itself from his hand and flew to him. He caught it and examined it for a moment. Oak wood, and probably a phoenix feather core, from the very slight spark he received as he held it. A good wand.

If only the wizard who wielded it were worthy of it.

Harry shook his head and tossed the wand back to Gorgon as the dueling circle and the privacy curtain, triggered by the loss of one combatant's wand, broke apart. He had thoughts like that more and more often lately, as though his anger for himself in the Minister's interrogation room had broken some barrier that he didn't know he had. Harry had tried to reestablish the barrier, but since he didn't know what it had been made of, patience or forgiveness or training, he wasn't having much luck.

Gorgon stared at him, horror and fear and anger in his eyes. Harry clenched one fist briefly. What did you think would happen when you attacked me, you idiot? Did you think I wouldn't defend myself?

He didn't have time to say anything, and neither did Gorgon, because just then Luna wandered up to Gorgon and stood gazing at him with huge silvery eyes.

"You should have used powdered Snorkack horns on your wand," she said. "Then you could have aimed it better." She shook her head slowly. "That's why you lost." She glanced at Harry. "And why you won."

Harry raised his eyebrows. No one is supposed to be able to see through the privacy curtain. "You could see what happened, Luna?"

"There are lots of things to see," said Luna dreamily, and then turned and wandered back into the group of Ravenclaws. Harry glanced at them nervously, wondering how they would respond to him dueling one of their Housemates.

Cho marched up behind Gorgon and smacked him roundly on the back of the head.

Gorgon rubbed the spot and turned around to stare at her. "Cho!" he wailed.

"I've had about enough of this," said Cho, her eyes narrowed and her face seething with a furious energy. Fascinated, Harry stared. He supposed she simply hadn't had enough time to be angry during Bellatrix's attack. "You've been chattering nonstop about wanting to have a duel with Potter for the last five days, and then, when you get the chance, instead of asking him to duel with you in a respectful way, you just try to hit him with the Blinding Curse? I thought you looked up that spell because you were genuinely interested in its history, not because you just wanted to use it on Harry!"

She closed her eyes and blew her breath out through her nostrils, then turned to Harry and shook her head slightly. "I'm sorry, Harry,"

she said. "I would never have helped him with his research if I knew what he was going to use it for."

"That's all right, Cho," said Harry, still a little stunned that he apparently had a friend in Ravenclaw besides Luna. He had thought that Cho's assistance extended to giving him the life debt bracelet. "Thank you."

Cho nodded back to him, and then turned and stalked out of the Great Hall. The other Ravenclaw girls pointedly followed, every one of them making sure to sniff at Gorgon as they passed. A few of the boys lingered and patted him on the shoulder, but they seemed embarrassed at being seen there, and hurried out after the girls as soon as possible.

Gorgon stood there, stock-still, and about that time the rest of the Great Hall appeared to recover and realize what insanity had taken place in front of them. Harry slipped his wand into his sleeve and listened in resignation as the Hall erupted, with shouting from the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, heated arguing as to who was really responsible from the Ravenclaw table, and loud congratulations and cheers from the Slytherin table.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced over his shoulder and tried to smile sheepishly at Professor McGonagall, who was looking at him sternly. "Sorry, Professor," he said.

She shook her head at him, lips pursed tight. Harry knew she was fond of him, but using magic on a fellow student went beyond what she could tolerate—especially when she knew how much stronger than most of the other students Harry was, and how easily he could have ended this "duel" with one spell.

Harry was now wishing, as McGonagall rounded on Gorgon, that he had done that. It hadn't been worthwhile to let Gorgon try and keep his pride, not when he was intent on dashing it to pieces anyway.

“And Mr. Gorgon! I am ashamed of you. Why would you try to take vengeance for the sake of an uncle who had a part in abducting a fourteen-year-old wizard? Would you honestly claim that he had done the right thing?”

“He’s a good Auror!” Gorgon howled, apparently stung into anger again. “He was sacked by mistake!”

“And you have made another one in his name,” McGonagall announced, voice tight. “Thirty points from Ravenclaw, Mr. Gorgon, and a week of detentions. With Argus Filch,” she added, making him flinch.

“And you, Mr. Potter.”

Harry lifted his chin and met her eyes. He saw them soften, and then McGonagall shook her head and sighed in exasperation.

“What you did in setting yourself beyond the reach of anyone else with the Single Combat Spell was foolish and dangerous,” she said quietly. “You or Mr. Gorgon could have been seriously hurt, and no one could have interfered. Thirty points from Slytherin as well, and five days of detention with me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Harry, and ignored Pansy’s long cry of how that wasn’t fair. He should have found a better way of doing this. He should have handled it right the first time. He frowned, and wondered when the moment was that he should have made the decision to do that.

“Do you want a detention as well, Miss Parkinson?” McGonagall asked.

“No, Professor,” said Pansy sulkily.

“Then remember that the danger to both Mr. Gorgon and Mr. Potter was very real,” said McGonagall, and swept away, shaking her head. Harry went back to the Slytherin table and gathered up his books.

“Harry.”

He jumped when an arm abruptly grabbed him around the waist and tugged him backwards. No one had touched him in a few weeks, and he'd got used to no one doing so. He yanked hard and managed to get away before he realized that it was Draco who'd done the tugging. He turned around swiftly.

Draco's face was stricken. But it shut down even as Harry watched, and he turned, threw his books into his bag, and then left.

Harry narrowed his eyes. That does it. He can't just be angry at me if he reached out and tried to touch me like that, and he wouldn't have been hurt that I tried to strike him. I'm getting some answers out of him tonight if I have to use the Single Combat Spell.

Harry leaned against the Owlery wall and watched as Hedwig flew out of sight, happily clutching the letter destined for Starrise. She had been huffy the past few weeks, watching Harry get constant post from admirers and detractors, while she did nothing but fly around a bit at breakfast and receive treats from Harry's plate. The Starrise family evidently lived quite a long way south, but that wouldn't deter her.

Harry had sent a very polite letter, thanking the Starrises for explaining to him about the broken sphere. He'd asked which artifact they would recommend the next time he wanted to have his magic drained, and apologized for having the bad taste to reject what was obviously the best. He asked to meet with them, so that he might have a guide to magic-draining artifacts.

They wouldn't be able to find a single impolite word or sentence in it, and no grammatical mistakes, either, but that wouldn't stop the scent of sarcasm from rising off the page. Harry regretted that he had no mirror and no way to spy into their house, so that he could not see what their expressions would be when they read it. He didn't even know who would receive it, a couple or an old matriarch or someone else.

He started to turn around, and then paused. Someone was standing near the Owlery entrance. Harry could feel the thrum of magic, pressing against his spine and tingling up and down his skin.

More to the point, he hadn't sensed the magic before this because it was so familiar to him, and trusted.

He let out a breath and said quietly, "I was coming to seek you out, Draco. Are you ready to speak with me now?"

Draco made a little growling noise, and then stepped further into the Owlery. Harry turned around, not bothering to change his position of leaning against the wall. He folded his arms, thought better of it, and then kept them folded. It might make Draco think he was unapproachable, and, well, Harry was feeling that way. He watched with slitted eyes as Draco edged closer and closer to him. His face was pale, except for two spots high on his cheekbones, and his hands worked in front of him as though he were missing his potions book.

"You nearly died today, Harry," Draco began.

"No, I didn't," said Harry. "Magically, Gorgon is much weaker than I am, and even if he'd got through with the Blinding Curse, it wouldn't have killed me."

Draco's face abruptly flushed all the way. "That's ridiculous!" he shouted. "How can—how can you just stand there and talk so lightly of your own life? It's stupid, and I won't stand for it!"

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was working hard to control his temper, really he was, but the words sliced at his lips, begging to be let out.

He breathed slowly, forcing himself to calm down. Bad things happened when he got angry. He flashed back to Umbridge and the black snake, and winced. No, that was not going to happen here. Besides, what Draco said was understandable. He had always been worried for Harry's life, and Gorgon's attack today had taken them all by surprise, and then Harry had pulled away from his attempt to comfort him afterward. Of course he would feel this way.

If he does, he should grow up.

Harry sat on the thought. It wasn't productive.

"All right, Draco, I'm sorry," he said, holding up a hand. "Yes, I did think pretty lightly of it. But he attacked me out of grief, and I tried to give him what he wanted, by setting up a private duel so that he could exorcise his anger. It didn't work. Yes, I should have thought of something else, done something else."

"Why did you pull away from me afterwards?" Draco demanded.

Harry blinked at the change of subject, but answered readily enough. "I was surprised."

"But I touch you all the time." Draco's voice had a low growl to it, and his own arms were folded now. Harry eyed his hands. So long as Draco didn't go for his wand, this argument was less serious than it could have been. Harry would keep that in mind. "You should be used to it by now."

Harry had a bad reaction to the words You should. He reminded himself, again, that Draco was irritated with him and had been for the past few weeks. This interaction was typical of their interactions for that time. He had no right to be angry at Draco for something that he understood.

I still want to understand what it was I did to lose his interest in the first place.

Harry shook his head, both in response to what Draco had said and in response to his own irrelevant thought. "I'd lost my being used to it," he replied, "because you hadn't done it in a while."

Draco looked genuinely startled. Harry blinked. Had he missed that he wasn't touching Harry as much, too?

Then Draco's face closed in that familiar way that Harry was beginning to hate. "You've hurt me, you know," he said. "The things you kept saying at breakfast today. Why would you assume that my research has anything to do with you?"

That wasn't what I said. That wasn't what I meant.

But it was something disturbing to consider, and Harry winced as he thought about it. How much time and attention did Draco lavish on him, and how much did Harry lavish on him in return? The answers were disturbing. Harry had become used to thinking of Draco as close to him, but he himself thought about being vates, his allies, Connor, how he would reconcile with his father now, what Dumbledore was up to, and even Snape more than he thought about Draco.

Maybe this is the core of what he's upset about, then. I can offer to spend more time with him, and see if that works.

Harry spread his hands slightly. "I know," he said. "I'm sorry. Is that it, Draco? Are you upset because I haven't spent as much time thinking of you as you have thinking of me?" He ran a hand through his hair. "I am sorry for that. I hope I can make it up to you. I do miss you. You are my friend, and I should respect that."

More disturbing to him than even the fact that he had not spent as much time considering Draco as Draco probably did considering him was the fact that it had taken him so long to notice. Harry would not have gone after Draco if he were sitting with the Gryffindors and tried to make him come back to the Slytherin table. Maybe that was what he should have done? Maybe that was the kind of friend that Draco wanted?

He looked up, to check on the progress of Draco's feelings, and found Draco's face still closed, still mulish.

"I told you," said Draco, and each word fell on the silence like a hammer on glass. "Not everything I think and believe and feel and do has to do with you."

Harry's anger consumed him so quickly that he was startled. You came up to the Owlery, you idiot! You accused me of not taking care of my own life! It wasn't so long ago that you seemed unwilling to share me with anyone else. And now you just expect me to know what's wrong with you even though you won't give me a hint?

He half-closed his eyes and choked back the words. He couldn't say them, not now that he knew beyond a doubt that Draco wanted to be left alone. It would be pressuring, forcing, making it sound as though Harry were demanding that Draco come back and be his friend. And he didn't have the right to demand that. How much had Draco done for him over the past years? Quite a lot. Therefore, if he wanted privacy and time to think about his potions research, Harry could grant that to him, and would.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated. "I just can't seem to understand that part." He smiled, but Draco didn't smile back, and Harry felt the expression wither on his own face. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I'll leave you alone for now. If you do want to speak with me later, let me know. I'd like to listen to whatever you have on your mind."

And he would, he thought, as he worked his way carefully towards the Owlery stairs, not touching Draco and not looking at him. He missed Draco's contemptuous dismissals of half the thoughts that Harry came up with as not worth his attention, his causal references to Gryffindors as idiots, even the way he sneered at Connor. It was, perhaps, perverse to miss someone for the negative qualities they had, but that seemed to be the case.

Harry had reached the stairs when Draco's arm abruptly shot out in front of him, barring his way. Harry blinked and turned his head.

"I didn't say that you could go—" Draco began, with his familiar haughty certainty.

The anger broke past Harry's barriers.

"I don't need your fucking permission to leave," he said, his voice a few octaves lower than it should have been if he were completely calm. "You've said that you don't spend every moment thinking of me, and I understand that. You deserve your own—call it what you will. Your own life. Your own time. But you're not going to control my movements because of that."

"And I thought you were my friend."

Harry snarled. He could feel his magic building, and knew he couldn't sit on it without it bursting out of him in unfortunate ways, not when he was this angry. He gestured with his right hand, and a jet of blue light shot past Draco and chewed into the stone instead. Harry focused on carving out a leering gargoyle face instead of looking at Draco. Draco was exasperating him badly right now.

"Draco," he said, when he thought he could control his voice and not simply scream, "I thought I knew what was wrong. Now I don't think I do, and you won't tell me."

"You should." Draco folded his arms again. "If you were really my friend, you'd know."

Harry snapped his head around. He knew his eyes were blazing. He saw Draco's eyes go wide as he stared at him. He didn't care.

"Fuck you, Draco," he said. "I thought you would know one thing about me if you know anything at all. I hate head games. I hate being manipulated. That's the one thing you've never done with me. Oh, sure, you've manipulated life debts and Slytherin rules, but you've never tried to reach into my mind and scramble my thoughts. And I'd appreciate if you refrained from doing it now."

Draco blinked, slowly. Then he said, "I told you, Harry. It doesn't have anything to do with you."

"I don't fucking believe you," said Harry, and then turned and stormed down the stairs. He had a detention with McGonagall, and so couldn't go flying out on the Pitch, but he hoped that she might have something intense for him to work on, such as a really stubborn spot on the floor. That was the only way he was going to calm his magic down.

The guilt was growing even as he descended, of course. You could have handled that better. You could simply have walked out. You shouldn't have got angry.

Harry closed his eyes. He was calm, after all, by the time he reached McGonagall's office. The guilt had eaten the anger.

Draco leaned on the wall of the Owlery, and stared at the face that Harry had carved, and shivered. Sometimes he forgot how strong Harry was, until he actually saw the magic work. The dueling spell today hadn't been impressive enough, since it had concealed everything that happened in the circle, and the sensation of power and the scent of roses were surprisingly easy to get used to.

But that didn't mean he was less angry at Harry.

Why can't he understand that this is important to me, and support me and be interested in it? Why can't he just be a friend to me, for once, instead of my always having to be a friend to him? And why did he keep pressing me to tell, when I didn't want to? He doesn't have the right to order me around. No one has the right to order me if I don't want to take the orders. And I thought that was what he was so frightened of, giving orders to someone else?

Apparently not.

Draco exhaled as hard as he could, and straightened. He had some more research to do on Malfoy ancestors in the thirteenth century. He should get back to that. The burning ambition was stirring in his chest even now, tugging him on.

And someday, when I'm at the end of this path, Harry will have to see me for what I am—just as powerful and just as worthy as he is.

Interlude: From Melinda and Hellebore

The Daily Prophet

September 16th, 1994

MINISTER CALLS FOR SOLUTION TO HARRY POTTER SITUATION

Calls Potter's Current Situation 'Disgraceful'

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, in an unexpected response to the allegations of abduction and mistreatment made by Harry Potter two weeks ago, has responded with a plea for a change in Potter's living situation.

Potter, 14, was interviewed by this very paper, and in that interview, his unusual home situation was emphasized. He is currently under the guardianship of Professor Severus Snape, of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, despite having two living parents. Of these parents, one, Lily Evans Potter, has been stripped of her magic under mysterious circumstances and is no longer considered a fit guardian for a young wizard, particularly one as magically powerful as Potter.

Potter's father, however, is James Potter, once a famed Auror, responsible for the capture of the Death Eaters Rodolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange. Before he retired to live with his young family in a special isolated home, out of fear of Death Eaters targeting the infant Boy-Who-Lived in vengeance for You-Know-Who's fall, he also accomplished many other acclaimed deeds. He is currently in residence at Lux Aeterna, the Potters' home for the last several generations.

Minister Fudge noted this and several other facts about Harry Potter's home situation in a special press conference given yesterday, and attended by select members of the press.

“Harry Potter is a child,” he declared, to the accompaniment of several charts that traced the evolution of laws meant to protect young wizarding children from unfit guardians and parents. “That he reacted as he did to what was actually a very innocuous Ministry procedure is understandable. However, it is my duty as Minister not to allow this misperception of Mr. Potter’s to continue.

“Mr. Potter has been under the guardianship of Professor Severus Snape for nearly a year, due to an unfortunate mistake made by members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and some lost paperwork. At one point soon after the fall of You-Know-Who, Severus Snape was tried as a Death Eater. He was cleared on the word of Albus Dumbledore. But it seems that we may have been wrong about him after all. It seems that he may have been poisoning the boy’s mind against the Light.”

Minister Fudge expressed his horror and surprise at the discovery, and his dismay that the odd situation had been allowed to continue for as long as it has.

“Of course, now I completely understand and forgive Mr. Potter’s accusations,” the Minister explained. “He has come young to his power, and he has been receiving inappropriate guidance from a Dark wizard. He needs to be in a loving home, with parents who can raise him in a good understanding of the Light.”

The Minister is confident that such a home can soon be found.

“After all,” he said, as he closed the press conference, “his twin brother is living proof that a young wizard can be very powerful, even powerful enough to defeat You-Know-Who, and yet able to believe and walk in Light. I humbly admit the Ministry’s part in not making sure that young Harry got the same kind of treatment sooner. It’s disgraceful. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my apologies to Mr. Potter, and my sincere wishes that he finds a new home soon, with all possible happiness involved.”

Hellebore Shiverwood

Ministry of Magic

Department of Magical Family and Child Services

September 16th, 1994

Dear Mr. Potter:

Greetings from the Ministry of Magic! We cordially extend an invitation for you to attend a private meeting, to be held in our offices in the Ministry on the autumnal equinox. This is the ancient day of balance, the day of readdressing grievances and righting wrongs, and we would now like to address a very great wrong. On this day, custody of you will be transferred back to your blood father, James Potter, who has completed all appropriate forms.

Please bring your current guardian, Professor Severus Snape, with you. With any luck, this will be a quick and efficient process that will return you to the best living situation for you as soon as possible.

Have a wonderful day, and a very happy late summer to you!

Hellebore Shiverwood.

Chapter Fifteen: He Will Have Cause to Regret

Snape gently dipped the tip of his quill into the off-white potion. In a moment, the liquid had clung to it, and he was ready to write his letter to James Potter. He nodded, and sat down to compose.

Potter:

I suppose you imagine that you can best me this way, that you will take Harry away from me in a legal battle. I would ask you to look beyond your own reflexive hatreds and childish grudges, but I suspect that would be like asking a Muggle to fly a broom. Therefore, I will come to this private meeting with you, since that will perhaps confront you with the results of your childishness in a way impossible for you to ignore.

Professor Severus Snape.

Snape finished writing and examined the tip of his quill. Yes, the ink had dried, and with it, the potion. He ran a finger down the side of the parchment and gave something that he knew was not a smile. Then he drew out a small brush waiting and ready in his pocket, dipped it into the potion, and used it to paint the sides of the parchment, watching patiently as it dried in turn. No matter where he picked up Snape's letter, Potter would absorb some of the potion through his fingers.

Then Snape turned and eyed the two other potions. The clear one was not yet ready, and would not be for some time. The potion with the candle floating on it glimmered and bubbled. Snape eyed it and nodded. Yes, it would take a few more days, but he had a few more days. The meeting with Potter and Fudge was not until the autumnal equinox, after all.

He folded his letter to Potter, slid it into an envelope, and then made for the Owlery, that he might find a bird to deliver it to Lux Aeterna. Meanwhile, his emotions exulted far beneath the surface, cold and stinging.

Potter was foolish to do this, and still more foolish to send a letter about the meeting to me before it was time. He will have cause to regret his actions.

He will have cause to regret so many things.

Harry clenched his hands in front of him and fought to control his temper. He had already had to leave breakfast because he was getting close to destroying half the dishes on the Slytherin table with his rage. At this rate, he would be late to Transfigurations before he had calmed down, but he didn't particularly care at the moment. He was so angry at his father that it was hard to breathe.

How could he do this to me?

Knowing that it was only, as James thought, in his best interests for once did nothing to improve Harry's general disposition or incline him towards leniency. His father knew that Harry didn't want this kind of legal challenge. He knew that Harry had wanted Snape to remain his guardian even when he was staying at Lux Aeterna. Why now? What had happened to make him change his mind?

Harry blinked and looked up as someone passed his hiding place, a small alcove on the second floor. It was Snape, walking back towards the dungeons. Harry could not be sure, but he thought his mentor's face was more relaxed than it had been of late, with a small sneer touching the corners of his mouth. Perhaps he had just assigned someone detention, Harry thought. In that case, Harry hated to interrupt his good mood with the letter about the meeting, but Snape was invited, too, and Harry had to make sure he went. He didn't trust himself to be alone in a room with James and only one other person, perhaps Madam Shiverwood.

"Sir," he called, stepping out into the hallway.

Snape halted and turned to face him, and the sneer vanished. Harry was left facing the same calm, cold, professorial face he'd confronted for a few weeks now. The last time Snape had seemed totally normal was when he gave Harry the lecture on using Dark spells without

thinking about it. No, come to think of it, he'd been oddly quiet even then. Harry hesitated.

"What is it, Harry?"

At least he's still calling me by my first name, even if it sounds strained. Harry decided that he would go ahead. "This letter, sir," he said, brandishing it. "The Department of Magical Family and Child Services says that they're revoking your guardianship over me and transferring it to—"

"Potter," said Snape, and an old, faint, habitual sneer colored the words. "Yes, I know. Your father sent me a letter gloating about it."

Harry winced. "Did he? I'm sorry, sir. But what are we going to do about it? I don't think the Ministry will listen if I just tell them that I want to be left with you."

"I have taken care of it. Do not worry."

Harry paused. "I—don't take this the wrong way, sir, but how?" He could just imagine some of the things that Snape would do to his father if he had the chance. Compulsion was probably the least of them.

"I do not wish to tell you," said Snape. "You will know it when you see it. Suffice it to say, Harry, that you are well-protected, even if you do not realize it." He turned and started to walk towards his office again.

"Sir! Wait, sir."

Snape gave him a glance of faint impatience. "What is it? I promise you, Harry, this has been taken care of. It will provide nothing more than a faint bit of embarrassment on our equinox morning."

Harry groped for and found the words he had been missing. "I wasn't going to ask about that, sir. I meant—why have you gone cold lately?" Not the best phrasing, perhaps, but it was what Harry thought of. Snape reminded him of himself when the cold fury gripped him at the end of second year. He could not think why Snape would be indulging

in it without a good reason, since Snape had always said that such icy rage was dangerous. "You're different, and I don't understand why."

Snape inclined his head. "It is an effect of the danger you have been in," he said, voice distant. "I realized that I was doing less than no good when I panicked and came too late to save you each time. That is why I wish to teach you to protect yourself, and to make sure that you are safe and guarded when a danger does threaten. The coldness is nothing more than an attempt to think rationally about the situation, instead of raging about each and every enemy."

"Oh," said Harry. He could think of nothing to say to that. He drew in his breath and forged ahead. "And do you know what's wrong with Draco? He still talks to me sometimes, but most of the time he ignores me, and we had an enormous fight in the Owlery yesterday."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I suggest you ask young Mr. Malfoy that."

"I did," said Harry. "He said that he didn't want to tell me."

Snape shrugged. "Then I suggest you leave it alone," he said. "Sometimes, Harry, people do need time apart from each other, and the way that you and Mr. Malfoy interact has been causing me anxiety for some time. Your friendship has been not so much a friendship as an obsession on his part and a desire to protect him on your part. Perhaps this is what you need, a small series of fights and distancings that will enable both of you to become better friends to each other."

Harry blinked and swallowed. He hadn't even considered that. He had known that he and Draco were not equal in what they gave to and received from each other since yesterday, but he had been so acutely unhappy that he had never even guessed that this separation could be a good thing, or that Snape would approve.

"Oh," he said again, and then nodded to Snape. "Thank you for letting me know that, sir."

He turned and walked off, quickly, speeding up when he was sure that he was out of Snape's sight. He knew he would miss Transfigurations now, but he made his way to the Slytherin common room anyway, which would be empty of everyone. It was one missed class, and he would take any extra detentions that McGonagall assigned him. The one yesterday, alphabetizing Transfiguration books by title, hadn't been bad.

He needed, very badly, some time alone to think.
Snape watched Harry go with narrowed eyes.

The boy is bothered. I did not realize that even a temporary loss of Draco would hit him so hard.

Then Snape shook his head.

This is the only way. Draco needs a distraction, and more, he needs an interest outside of Harry, something that could lead to him having true friends and a true, driving passion that does not revolve around his crush. No one else will step in. There is no other way so guaranteed to work.

And Harry would not speak to me again if he knew that I had used compulsion. I cannot tell him the truth.

Snape began the journey to the dungeons again when he was sure that he would not run into Harry. This might be painful for the boy right now, but in the end, he would be the stronger for it. Harry had said again and again that he did not want friends whose lives revolved around him through compulsion. That Draco's state had not been the result of Harry's magic made no difference. It was like compulsion, and it was damaging and destroying Draco's freedom, something Snape did not want to see happen to any member of Slytherin House.

He sank the concerns to the cold level of his mind, and smirked. He had a class of third-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs to terrorize. Harry whispered, "Ventus dirus," to the stone wall, and it slid aside and admitted him to the Slytherin common room. As Harry had known

it would be, it was empty. Harry hesitated, and thought about flopping down and having his think on the couch in front of the fire.

Then he shook his head and made for the fourth-year boys' room. He didn't want anyone coming in because of a forgotten book or homework and interrupting him, even if it was only for a few minutes. Above all, he didn't want to have to answer awkward questions right now.

He opened the door to his room, and gave a brief, satisfied nod. The room was cool and dark. Harry made his way to his bed, climbed in, and drew the curtains shut after him. Then he lay back and stared at the ceiling of the four-poster.

He hadn't been thinking. It was time to think, not just react.

Harry folded his hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and asked himself the first question: When had Snape and Draco begun acting strange?

He knew the answer, as long as he was counting Draco's strange behavior from his trying to wrestle Harry away from the Gryffindor table that first day of school and not just from the day he'd started reading the old Potions book. Draco had been furiously protective of him the day before, too, even though all he and Harry had done before the attack by Bellatrix Lestrange was play Exploding Snap together, fend off the post owls delivering letters to Harry, and talk about the upcoming year. And Snape had gone cold and strange the very same day, with his lecture to Harry about Bellatrix and Sectumsempra.

So, now, the second question: Why did they begin acting strange? What could Harry have done to send them into those states? How had he acted differently?

And that one, too, was easy to answer, once he thought about it.

I took them for utter granted in the meeting in Scrimgeour's office. I could have told them the truth privately before I revealed it to my

allies, but I didn't. They deserved to hear it in private. They've done more for me than anybody else. And I barely even looked at them during the meeting, as though I expected them just to nod and accept whatever I said.

What other unconscious arrogance have I been manifesting? I've been acting this way, with regard to Draco, for years. I see that now. But I think I finally passed the boundary of what they were willing to tolerate. Taking them for granted finally angered them. And, as Snape pointed out, constantly putting myself in danger only heightened the feeling that I took them for granted. I didn't trust them enough to bring them along when I confronted my enemies.

Harry felt his breath speed up. The idea that he might have lost his best friend and his guardian forever, through his own actions, was making tears prickle at the corners of his eyes. And the idea of that combined with the other things he had to accomplish—the vates duties, facing his father down and somehow maintaining Snape's legal guardianship of him, this political duel with the Minister, instructing Connor in leadership, learning offensive and Dark magic, negotiating with his allies—was enough to send a tight spring of panic coiling in the center of his chest. How was he ever going to do it all? How was he going to hold up without collapsing under the weight?

You can do this. You know you can. And now that you know the problem with Draco and Snape, you know how to solve it.

Harry gave a shallow nod, for all that no one else was there to see it. He had been acting out of emotions recently: arrogance, hurt, blind anger. He knew how to see past them. He had seen past them for years, when he knew that his brother's life hung on his actions. Just because he had a different set of lives to save now, more happiness to make himself responsible for preserving and protecting, did not mean that he was going to collapse.

You can do this. You can repair the results of your own mistakes. You know the determination that kept you going, when you might have given up on learning the spells that you needed to protect Connor? Summon it back. You've shamefully neglected it during the last little while. But you can stand up under the weights hanging on your

shoulders. None of them is an imposition. They're all mistakes that you made without realizing you were making them, or duties and entanglements that you chose. That ought to make you more eager to tackle them, not less.

Harry could feel his breathing ease. The tears receded from the corners of his eyes. He stared at the ceiling of his bed again and knew his face was calm.

Carefully, he gathered up all the swimming emotions that were plaguing him and making his reactions blunt and clumsy and of the kind that hurt other people, and tucked them under the surface of the quicksilver pools that Snape had taught him to use in Occlumency. This was not the same thing as the box that had caused him so much trouble in second year, and which Harry was never going to use again. These containers were fluid. They would hold the emotions without making him unaware of them; he could summon them back if he wanted them. What they did do was give him patience and clear his mind for the kind of understanding that everyone around him needed from him so desperately.

His magic stirred, and for once, it was magic without the spikes and claws it had grown in the last week. This magic was simply eager to do what he wanted it to do, to have exercise. Harry exhaled the last of his fear and doubt and anger, and then tried out a smile. It felt more natural on his face than it had in a long time.

I have to be conscious of what I'm doing. I always knew that, with regard to being vates, but I should have known it would also apply to the relationships I have with other people. Harry shook his head, but the regret was fading into self-deprecating amusement. I have caused harm, but none of it is irreversible, not if I start watching my steps right the fuck now.

And I will. I have to. I have all this power. That means that I must know what I do with it, since no one else is going to hold my shoulder and guide me through the motions. I can make people's lives better, or I can mess them up without even realizing it. I want to do the first. To defend and protect and serve, Narcissa wrote me once. That's what the not-a-lord kind of powerful wizard does.

That's what I want to do. I forgot about that for way, way too long. I'm rededicating myself to that as of now.

I know what Snape wants from me: to study offensive spells, and leave him alone to brood in peace, to stop asking for so much and just to trust him. Well, I can give him that. As long as I handle my Occlumency right, then I can even be cheerful about it.

Draco wanted my unconditional support when he wanted it and to leave him alone the rest of the time. Granted! That's where my magic comes in useful. I still won't use Legilimency on him unless he asks me to, but I can easily enough tell what he's feeling towards me. There's a spell in the book Hawthorn gave me on that. When he's angry and wants to be left alone, I'll know, and when he wants me there to ask questions or give him respectful silence or whatever else it is, then I can know and go to his side. There. It's easy. I'm glad.

And that left the situation with James.

Harry sighed. I can't do anything to make the situation worse. Snape told me that he'd handled it, and I should trust him. He's right. Writing a letter to James or yelling at him would only make him angrier, and maybe the meeting would be moved up and whatever plan Snape has wouldn't work. I'll just write a polite letter to Father telling him that I don't approve of what he did. He has his reasons, after all. I'd like to know what they are.

Harry lay still for a moment more, checking his new list of resolutions. It seemed solid enough. It made his life so much simpler, and it would give the people around him what they wanted.

Harry was rather surprised it hadn't occurred to him to do this before. After all, there was much evil in what his mother had taught him, but there was much good as well. Harry knew, now, that he didn't have to dedicate his life to his brother or wear the phoenix web that would compel him into feeling love and loyalty for his family. That meant he was free to choose where to place his love and loyalty, and what to do with his magic.

And I choose to do these things. I've wanted to be vates anyway, once I understood what the magical creatures needed from me. This is just understanding more about what other people need from me.

Time to grow up, Harry.

Draco gave a small growl and slammed the book shut. This was making no sense. I thought books weren't like people, he thought, as he leaned back, put his arms across his chest, and scowled at the book he'd just closed as well as the other tomes lying on the table, and couldn't lie.

But what he had found made no sense at all. He'd been researching Julia Malfoy, the ancestor of his who had slept with her own brother to produce an heir to the Malfoy line. He'd admired her strength and determination, and from the letter that his mother had written him about her, Draco had been sure that she must have the compulsion gift. That sounded like a good choice for an ancestor sympathetic to him. After all, Draco had inherited the Black blood, and some Blacks had been compellers.

But there was no mention of Julia Malfoy in the huge Collegium List of Registered Compellers 1299-1504, and there should have been. The Collegium, the predecessor of the Ministry in record-keeping, hadn't bothered with this nonsense of asking people to come in and register their magical gifts of their own free will. Instead, they had simply recorded anyone born with a certain kind of magic, much the same way that Hogwarts recorded the birth of magical children to be sent letters on their eleventh birthdays. It wouldn't have mattered whether Julia Malfoy told anyone about her gift or not. She should still be listed there.

And she wasn't.

Did that mean that she didn't really have the compulsion gift? Draco shifted his glare to the book that lay beside the Collegium one. But that means that this history is wrong to insist that she did. And the descriptions it gives of how she smiled at people and made them do what she wanted certainly makes it sound as if she could compel them.

Draco rubbed his face wearily. He'd been in the library, researching and neglecting his Charms essay. He didn't want to leave, though. He wanted to solve this mystery, and be able to make the potion right now. Julia Malfoy was the best candidate he had found so far, and he didn't want to abandon her now.

I wish Harry were here.

A few minutes later, as he was still sitting there and trying to work out the best way to continue his research, footsteps sounded behind him, and a soft voice said, "Draco?"

Draco turned and blinked. Harry hovered at the end of the aisle of shelves, as though he would turn and retreat in a moment if Draco didn't want him there.

Draco motioned for him to come closer.

Harry took a seat on the opposite side of the table. He didn't ask, irritatingly, for answers to questions that Draco didn't want to give and which he should already know anyway. He didn't try to connect the present situation with any one in the past. He simply sat and waited, in a calm, listening silence, into which Draco could choose to pour words or not.

Draco poured words into it.

"Look at this," he snapped, pushing the Malfoy history book towards Harry. Harry obediently picked it up and let it flop open at the beginning of the section on Julia Malfoy, which Draco had thumbed through so often in the past day that he'd weakened the book's binding. "She could compel people. I know she could. Just read the descriptions. But she should be in here." He touched the Collegium book. "And she's not. I don't understand."

Harry was quiet, reading the book for a long moment. Then he looked up, blinking. "Perhaps it's a different kind of compulsion?" he asked, his voice soft and meek.

Draco blinked in turn. "What do you mean?"

Harry turned the history book towards him and touched a particular passage. Draco bent over and read it. He'd skimmed through it a few times, since it seemed to have no particular relevance to what he was doing.

Observers often reported a dazzling aura around Lady Julia, as though she were about to burst into light like a phoenix any moment. She would smile gently when questioned about it and murmur that she had no great power, only the grace that was her due for being born a Malfoy. And, indeed, despite the many reports that spread after her death, while alive, no one ever saw her perform any feat of dazzling magical prowess.

Draco looked up and shook his head. "I don't see what you mean."

"She was hiding, I think," said Harry. "She could make other people think that she wasn't a powerful witch just by saying that she wasn't. But she couldn't hide her aura." He hesitated, and then the thick scent of roses filled the room.

Draco felt his eyes widen as the suspicion caught up with him. "She was powerful enough to be a Light Lady or a Dark Lady," he whispered. "Her magic could drug the people around her and get them following her inclinations. But it's not the same as her actually having to reach into people's minds and drive home her desires. That would explain both the incidents that look like compulsion and the fact that no one ever reported her formally as a compeller who somehow managed to escape the Collegium's list. She was just using a side-effect of her magic."

Harry nodded and smiled.

Draco whistled under his breath, thinking of what he might become if he could summon Julia's ghost and gather in her magic. First, of course, he had to make sure that her magic hadn't passed to her son, or any of the other dozen-odd children in the Malfoy line to whom she had been a surrogate mother. He thought it unlikely, however. He'd already studied the Malfoy generation after her, in cursory detail, and none of them were powerful enough to be a Lord or Lady.

And if her magic remained free, uncontained in any body, like the magic that came and haunted the dancers on Walpurgis Night, then Draco could draw it towards him. And if he were sympathetic enough to her—if his soul and hers sang the same song—then he could absorb the power and become, perhaps, a Lord, able to compel people without it being formal compulsion, himself.

He would have to make sure he and Julia were sympathetic before anything else. But Draco had the quiet, determined feeling that they would be.

He looked up and met Harry's eyes, flashing him a small smile. "Thanks." He's really not so irritating when he helps me and doesn't talk as though everything I do had a connection to him.

Harry smiled back at him, a smile that Draco found he had missed. "Of course." He hesitated a long moment, then said, "I understand that you just want some time to yourself, Draco. I'll help you however I can, and won't ask any questions that you don't want to answer. I understand that you need your own life." He met his eyes firmly. "It's nothing more than you've given me for years."

Draco blinked, stunned. Now, if only he had understood that yesterday, this whole fight could have been avoided.

"Thank you, Harry," he said. "It won't be all the time. I think we do need some separate time. I can't spend every moment running around after you." Especially when you were ignoring me anyway, his temper added, but Draco ignored it in turn. Harry was trying to make a compromise, and wasn't doing anything like talking to the Chang bitch right in front of Draco. It was almost as though he had figured out that Draco loved him and was giving him the silent support that any lover had a right to demand.

Harry nodded. "I know. Sorry for that, Draco." He rose smoothly to his feet. "I'll see you when I see you."

Draco smiled and watched him out of the library. Then he shook his head and snatched up the Malfoy history book again, this time to look

for clues that he and Julia were in sympathy-song, all the while humming under his breath. His life went so much more smoothly when people just agreed with and understood him.

"Come in, Harry, come in."

Albus watched approvingly as Harry came in and shut the door behind him, taking a seat in the chair opposite his desk without waiting to be asked. Harry even met his eyes fearlessly, and only smiled at the small touch of Legilimency Albus used. Albus found calm, clear patience and determination in the forefront of his mind, and thick shields piled on shields behind them, showing the unmistakable quicksilver touch of Severus's teaching.

He could read none of Harry's emotions, but he could tell that Harry wasn't letting them interfere with his thinking. Something had obviously changed Harry's habit of reacting without consideration of the consequences lately, and that was wonderful. They could not have an overly emotional, impulsive fourteen-year-old Lord flinging his magic anywhere he liked.

"Have you considered what I told you last time, about sacrificing bits of your magic to help the magical creatures?" Albus asked him.

Harry leaned back in his chair and adopted a thoughtful frown. "I don't think it would work, sir. They would still be in prisons if I did that, not truly free. It would just be making them ignore their prisons." He met Albus's eyes. "With respect, sir, I don't think I can do it that way."

"What would you do, then?" Albus concealed his sharp stab of disappointment. And things were going so well. Well, at least he has been ignoring politics. There was no snappy letter to James, and that Skeeter woman has not done a second article about Fudge yet.

"I would make a thorough study of the webs, see what shattering them would cost people, and then try to alleviate the consequences," said Harry. "There is one magical artifact in Lux Aeterna which might help. It forces the person who enters it to be absolutely honest with himself. If I walked through it, and asked it questions about the webs, then it would help me see any consequences I was ignoring." He

frowned. "But walking it took my father months. I'm not sure that I can afford the time. I think I'll ask Fawkes first. He can tell me many wise things, I'm certain, being a phoenix."

Albus lifted his eyebrows, impressed in spite of himself. The boy sounded wise, as though he had actually thought about this instead of just declaring that he would unleash chaos. And he was talking about absolute honesty, which, like free will and domestication, had always been a trait of the Light. He might turn out a Light Lord after all.

Better than all that, the slow pace at which Harry evidently intended to move would give Albus time to weave more plans which might contain him.

"I have nothing to say except that I approve of your plan entirely, Harry," Albus said. "Please let me know if there is anything else that I can tell you about being vates. I am anxious to see our world continue in Light."

Harry smiled at him as he stood. "Thank you, sir."

Albus watched him go. Have I been wrong? Is he the best chance for the wizarding world after all, and I have simply been ignoring it? This is stupid.

Harry nearly leaped off the moving staircase in surprise. He hadn't heard from Regulus at all in the past several days, and guessed that he had been upset over Harry's demand that he stop seeking out Voldemort.

Harry winced a little. I have no right to forbid him from that. Yes, it's dangerous, but all I can do is explain the danger and hope that he listens. I don't have any right to control him, and I couldn't, anyway.

"Where have you been?" he whispered aloud, as he stepped off the bottom step and out past the gargoyle. "Are you all right? Is the connection to Voldemort still working?"

All's quiet for now. I can't read most of his thoughts. Regulus's voice became brisk. But that's not what I came to talk to you about. This is stupid, Harry, what you're doing. It's an exact variation of what you were doing to yourself before.

I don't know what you mean, said Harry in confusion, as he headed towards the dungeons. Connor had asked him for lessons in leadership in a few days, and Harry wanted to make a list of what things he considered it most important for his brother to learn. I'm trying very hard not to make any of the mistakes that I made in the past, while still aware that I'll make some. I'm giving people what they want. I'm not tamping all my emotions down; I still crack open the pools and let them out sometimes. The same with my magic. I'm trying to make up for ignoring Draco and Snape.

Regulus retreated into wordless grumbling. Harry smiled. He thought it sounded like a good argument himself.

He felt a brief stir of anxiety, since tomorrow was the autumnal equinox and the day he would see James, but the anxiety faded as he remembered Snape's plan. He had to trust in Snape. If he said he had a plan that would take care of it, then he would take care of it. Harry's instinct was still to cry and rage, but his instincts had got him in enough trouble in the past few weeks.

His mind hummed smoothly as he considered what he would do tomorrow, laying all the plans neatly in place. The meeting with James would not take most of the day, he hoped. He had so many other things to do.

He was busy, and he was happy, far happier than he had ever been while he was trying to be Connor's protector and failing at it.

I don't like failing. I was failing all over the place in the last little while. I'll undoubtedly fail in the future. But this time, at least, I can see it coming and hopefully head it off, or recover from it quickly.

There are people who need so much. It's horrible that the magical creatures have been bound in webs for so long, and that Snape and Draco felt they had to retreat from me to have any semblance of a

normal life. I was leaning on them, and I didn't realize it. Well, they can lean on me for once, if they need to, and stand apart from me, if they need to. I want to show them that they're absolutely as important as everyone else in my thinking, and deserve the same consideration.

I just want them to be happy.

Chapter Sixteen: On This Day of Balance

“James, I wish you wouldn’t do this.”

James kept his back turned to Remus as he picked up a handful of Floo powder. “I know, Remus,” he said quietly. “You’ve told me several times now that you wish I wouldn’t do this, that you think it’s the wrong thing to do, that it’s only going to make Harry hate me.” He paused and glanced over his shoulder at the oldest friend left to him now—unless one counted Peter, and James still didn’t feel he could. Probably even less than before, after today. “But you don’t understand. Harry can hate me. But at least he’ll be alive. I’m going to take him out of Hogwarts and tutor him in Lux Aeterna for the year. Then at least Death Eaters can’t attack him the way they always seem to at Hogwarts.”

“And Severus?” Remus’s hands were clenched at his sides, his amber eyes alive with the wolf. It made James remember the day Remus had tried to take Harry away from the house in Godric’s Hollow, and James had come after him with silver. He bit his lip. He did not want to remember that day. “Do you think he’ll hate you any less for this, James?”

“I’m rather hoping he won’t,” said James, and rubbed the powder between his fingers. “He shouldn’t have tried to raise my son if he couldn’t keep him safe. I’m going now, Remus,” he added, and then tossed the dust into the fire. The flames flared green.

“I think you’re making a mistake,” Remus whispered.

James shook his head and took a single stride forward, calling, “Department of Magical Family and Child Services!” Remus kept trying to persuade him out of his chosen course of action, but he couldn’t actually offer a rationalization of his arguments, other than that it was the wrong thing to do. James would need stronger arguments than that.

I should have done this before, he thought, as he whirled through the fireplaces. I never should have listened to Harry. He tries, Merlin knows, but he can’t guard his own life the way that he guards others’.

He's always going to take risks as long as he thinks that he should. So just restrict him from the outside world, and don't let him be around anyone he thinks he needs to save, and he should be safe.

It was such a simple solution that James was frankly surprised that it had never occurred to Snape. He had never thought the man was stupid. Stubborn, pig-headed, a bastard, yes, but not stupid.

That only proves that he doesn't really care about Harry, James decided as he stepped out of the Floo at his destination. There was a polite little carpet to catch the soot that came with him. If he really cared, he would have thought of this solution and asked me to take Harry back myself.

"Mr. Potter!" gushed the witch sitting behind the desk, rising to shake his hand. "We've heard so much about you! Please, won't you sit down and take a cup of tea? My name is Hellebore Shiverwood. Professor Snape and your son should be here in a moment."

James shook the woman's hand, and looked her over carefully. Hellebore Shiverwood looked a sensible witch in her early forties, in the kind of casual dark robes that most Ministry employees favored. Her green eyes sparkled at him with something near hero-worship, though. James supposed that was the cause of her gushing.

Well, never let it be said that I can't use that to my advantage.

Instead of letting go of Hellebore's hand when the shaking was done, he shifted his clasp to her wrist and raised it to his lips, kissing her palm. Hellebore blushed as he murmured, "Your pardon, madam. My shock overcame me, and led to ill manners. Such beauty can do that to a man."

The witch ducked her head and said, "Well, Mr. Potter, really." But she gestured him to a chair in front of her desk with a benevolent motion. "Now, are you sure that you won't take a cup of tea?"

"One would be lovely, thank you." James looked around the room. It was almost bare, with only one portrait in the middle of each wall. The portraits were all of children. James blinked when he realized that

one child was dressed as if he came from a Dark pureblood family, one from a Light pureblood family, one from a Muggleborn one—that was reinforced by the Muggle bicycle next to her, which she kept idly kicking with one leg when she wasn't grinning out of the portrait—and one from a family of mixed heritage. I hadn't expected the office to be so open about serving all magical children.

Hellebore Shiverwood came back to her desk, and gave him the cup of tea. James accepted it, studying her the while. It would be a mistake to underestimate her. The witch who could decorate her office like this would probably take the duties of her position seriously, and if she thought Harry was better off with Snape, then she wouldn't hesitate to assign him there.

But Hellebore smiled at him, and James relaxed. She liked him, he reminded himself. Besides, she would have a natural prejudice in favor of blood family unless she was dealing with a case of abuse; most wizards and witches did.

"And here they are," said Hellebore, abruptly glancing up as the door of her office opened. "Ah, welcome, welcome! A happy late summer to you!"

James smiled grimly as he rose to his feet to face the thief of his son. It is too much to hope that he might come to his senses as on his own, or I might have been content to handle this a different way. But Snape always did have to be cowed by a show of naked force. "Ardesco!"

Snape nodded as Harry's Intense Flame spell caused the nearest wooden figure to take fire from the inside, consuming itself in a burst of flames and ashes. Harry stepped back and turned calmly to face him. Harry was almost always calm lately, Snape had noticed, the turmoil in his mind that Snape could feel through the passive link soothed into silver silence. That was obviously a sign that the treatment was working. Harry also seemed to have adapted to the partial loss of Draco, and no longer pestered him. Everything was working.

Of course it is, said the voice of the scorpion of ice inside him. When you go cold, then everything makes much more sense, and everything is for the best.

Snape could not understand how he had endured before, when every attack on Harry made his heart stutter and race. Now he knew about them, and how to prevent them, before they happened.

“Better,” he allowed. “But you will need to be quicker. I saw that you could not choose your target for several seconds. When many enemies are charging you at once, you must choose at once and cast to kill.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, and Snape could feel his thoughts turning inside his head, as excited as they ever got, pulling down the information, studying it, and shoving it firmly into place. He relaxed in the next moment and dipped his head. “Isn’t it almost time for the meeting with Madam Shiverwood and my father, sir?”

Snape sneered in spite of himself. “Do not call him your father,” he said, turning towards the cauldron in the corner. Yes, the potion with the candle floating on it was ready. Snape scooped out a ladle full of it and dipped it into the vial he had ready, then tucked it into his robes. He could feel the spike of Harry’s startlement, but by the time he turned back, his charge had his eyes on the floor again.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

Snape gestured ahead of him. “We will take the Floo from the Headmaster’s office to the Minister’s,” he said. “He evidently wishes to speak with us before we meet with Madam Shiverwood and Potter.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry repeated, almost the only words he used around Snape these days, and then turned and walked ahead of him.

Snape let the cold rage fill his own thoughts until they were slick and glittering, like ice. The vial in his pocket might have burned a hole there, which would have been a good joke, considering what it was meant to do. Snape had not yet decided on a name for this particular

potion, and he considered that, in the frozen rationality of his mind, as they waited for the gargoyle to leap aside and rode the moving staircase upward.

A name came to him, a myth, a legend, a story, and Snape felt his lips curl in grim amusement, the only kind he felt these days.

The Meleager Potion. Yes, I think that will do quite nicely.

Enjoying his private joke, Snape almost did not notice that they had entered the Headmaster's office until Albus's voice surrounded them. "Ah, boys," he was saying, as he handed a pinch of Floo powder to Harry. "Off to meet the Minister, then?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

Snape narrowed his eyes. Why does he sound almost the same saying that to Albus as to me? What is wrong with the boy? I know that he does not trust Albus, and I had thought he trusted me.

He made a mental note to speak with Harry later, and sneered at the twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes as he watched Harry cast the Floo into the flames and call, with no prompting, "Minister Fudge's office!"

The flames turned green, and they were through.

They emerged in a room far, far too overdecorated for the man it was meant to serve, Snape thought, sneering in a circle. It had portraits of former Ministers on the walls—gilded ones. It had a large chair behind the desk—large and comfortable enough to hold the half-breed gamekeeper. The desk itself was made of polished ironwood—a luxury for someone like Fudge. Snape touched the vial in his pocket again, and slid the stopper off with long-practiced fingers. The Meleager Potion seeped out slowly, thick and viscous, coating his fingers. That was all right. This particular potion, unlike the one he had given Potter, had to be ingested to be effective.

And it smelled like chocolate, so that was not a problem.

“Ah, ah, Professor Snape, Mr. Potter!” Fudge was coming around his desk towards them, his hand already extended. “So nice to see you again, and under more auspicious circumstances than the last ones were!” He nodded to Snape with a foolish beam.

Snape simply sneered at him, but reluctantly extended his potion-smeared hand to be shaken. Fudge shook it, then blinked and peered at his fingers.

“My apologies, Minister,” said Snape smoothly. “I was called...rather abruptly from my work, and I am afraid that some of the products of my brewing were still on my hands. I have a bit of cloth that—”

“No, no,” said Fudge, with a faint, faraway look in his eyes. The potion’s scent has some intoxicating properties when it is ready, Snape noted to himself, as he watched Fudge happily lick the potion from his fingers. It was something he had suspected, but hadn’t been able to test, for obvious reasons. “I rather like chocolate,” Fudge said, with a wink at Snape, when he was finished. “And, of course, you can’t make poisons all the time, no matter how grim! Eh? Eh?”

Snape merely stared at him, and Fudge’s smile withered. He turned to Harry. “Hello, young Mr. Potter. Quite a mischievous article you published about me, really!” He shook his head and clucked his tongue. “You like making up fabulous stories, don’t you?”

Harry’s mind remained calm. Snape narrowed his eyes. How did the boy do that? Occlumency, obviously, but I had not thought him so far advanced. I must remind him to tell me everything.

“They weren’t stories, Minister Fudge,” said Harry. “They were true. You know it. You were there, even as I was.”

Fudge’s smile withered again. He tried to recover by replacing it with an even wider, brighter one, but the effort was obviously strained. He walked behind his desk and shuffled some pieces of parchment, looking at his hands as though they were going to give him an answer any moment now.

"The fact of the matter is, Mr. Potter," he said at last, looking up, "I've had some—unpleasant letters as the result of your article."

"Howlers, Minister?" Harry asked, as though he were genuinely interested.

"Not only Howlers, not only Howlers," said Fudge, and coughed. "Others. There are apparently, ah, many citizens of our fair island who take a great deal more interest in our government than I ever knew. There is, in particular, one assault—that is to say, one series of forceful messages coming from one section of them, suggesting I resign." He leaned forward and stared directly into Harry's eyes, as if he thought that would make a difference. "The Dark pureblooded families."

"Fancy that," said Harry politely.

"It's, well, rather been taking up my time lately, and Madam Umbridge's," said Fudge, with a fake laugh. "I would appreciate it, Mr. Potter, if you could tell them that there's really nothing to be concerned about. It would mean a lot, if you could stand at my side for one of Ms. Honeywhistle's articles and reassure them that what you said happened really wasn't as bad as all that."

"But it was, Minister," said Harry.

Snape stared at him again. The boy was an absolute wall. His shields weren't letting any emotion through except calm, polite interest, not even a hint of amusement. Snape frowned. I know he can shield well, but to do it this well, he must have some hidden motivation. And he hasn't discussed that with me, either. The ice in him rattled.

Fudge's mouth opened, and hung there like that for a moment. Then he closed it with a little click. "You aren't, ah, you won't change your mind, then?" he asked.

"No, sir."

Snape watched Fudge attempt to stand up straight and give Harry a stern look. He might as well have been giving a cloud a stern look.

Harry just watched him, and then the Minister turned away and pouted, like a child.

“Fine, then,” he said. “Go to your meeting with your father and Madam Shiverwood, Mr. Potter. I hope that you’ll find more there to content you than you can seem to find here with me.”

“I’m sure I will, Minister,” said Harry, so smoothly that Snape didn’t even notice the vicious insult until they were almost out of the office. Then he shook his head and caught up with Harry as his ward studied a map on the wall, locating the Department of Magical Family and Child Services.

“Why are you shielding like this?” he hissed at Harry, just to make sure they weren’t overheard. A wizard was walking down the hall behind them, heading for Fudge’s office.

Harry turned to him. “I thought about what you said, sir,” he said, also keeping his voice low and carefully correct. “That I should have some trust in you, and spend some time apart from Draco. But I can’t spend all my time apart from Draco; sometimes he wants me there. So I’ve been shielding the emotions that would keep me from achieving those goals, and only letting through the ones that would help.” He shrugged and gave Snape a small smile. “You were right, sir. It works much better. And I’ve been more productive and happy since I started doing this.”

He certainly had been, Snape had to admit, with some trepidation that he couldn’t place. Draco had been thriving, talking to other Slytherins besides Harry about some of the subjects he’d uncovered in his research, happily monopolizing Harry’s time when he did want him there, and occasionally coming to Snape to demand extra books that Hogwarts’s library didn’t have. And Harry had been practicing his Dark Arts spells with more determination and dedication, and not asking Snape nearly as many questions, which in turn left him more time to go on with the potions and other methods of defense that would secure Harry’s life.

He supposed what had disconcerted him was the completeness and swiftness of Harry's change. But when the boy decided he was going to do something, he did it.

He nodded to Harry and stepped back. "So long as we are agreed that that is the only reason you are shielding," he said.

"Of course, sir," said Harry, looking puzzled. "I only want to make you and Draco happy, to make up for some of the worry I've put you through."

I cannot find anything wrong with that, Snape thought, a tension he hadn't realized was there falling from his shoulders.

"Excuse me," said a voice from behind Snape's shoulder. "I hate to intrude, but I felt the boy's power just now, and he does look familiar from the newspaper articles. I thought I should introduce myself."

Snape turned and sneered at the wizard automatically. He had long golden hair braided with golden bells, and his robes were thick and heavy, elaborate with golden sigils in a language that Snape knew was one of protection. His eyes were blue, and startlingly direct. He met Snape's gaze without blinking before he looked at Harry.

"My name is Augustus Starrise," he said.

Harry dipped his head in a polite bow. "How do you do, sir?"

Starrise nodded back to him. "We have received your reply," he said. "We are considering how to respond. You truly are a master of the written word, Potter. I congratulate you." He smiled, a sharp expression. "That does not mean, of course, that we will stop advising the Minister. I hope that your meeting goes well, and that you are back in your blood father's custody by the end of the day. A child should be with his parents." His eyes raked Snape up and down, and his eyebrows rose. "Not with someone who might teach him Dark magic, however well-intentioned."

Snape fought the urge to snarl. He hated Light pureblooded wizards even more than Dark ones. They were far more open with their opinions, since they considered it a matter of honesty and honor to be.

“You were the one who arranged this, then?” Harry asked, and his emotions briefly stirred.

“Of course. Fudge is not clever enough to come up with this plan on his own.” Starrise shook his head, making the bells in his hair clang. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting with our dear Minister to get to.”

He turned and walked off down the hall. Snape clenched his hand on the vial of Meleager Potion and regretted that he did not yet know what would happen if he spread it to a second subject before it had taken effect on the first.

“Let’s go, sir.”

Harry’s hand was on his arm, his voice pitched low enough to soothe. Snape let himself be soothed, and drawn along. He wondered when their positions had reversed, and Harry had become the one to offer him comfort.

When he made his change, I suspect.

They found Madam Shiverwood’s office easily enough, and entered. Snape could see James Potter rising to his feet as they did, a hard smile on his lips.

It was time. Potter would have absorbed the potion through his fingers when he read Snape’s letter, and it had had a few days to settle inside him—inert until its creator spoke the operative spell, of course.

Snape laid his hand on the wand in his robe pocket and whispered, “Augesco.”

Then he watched in contentment as the potion took effect.

Harry had braced himself for the first sight of his father. It hit him like a knife blade between the shoulders, like Madam Umbridge's Lamina Alba hex, but thanks to his shields, he was able to part the surface of his mind, receive the shock, and then absorb it again, swallowing it like a stone dropping into a pool.

"Hello, James," he said, remembering just in time that Snape had said he wasn't to refer to him as his father.

James drew breath as if to reply, and then sealed his lips together. A weird, high-pitched giggle edged out of his mouth.

Harry blinked and glanced at Snape, only to find his eyes half-shut and locked on James's face. An expression of lazy pleasure was there, though someone else would have known only that Snape was smirking, Harry was sure.

"Mr. Potter?" the witch behind the desk asked worriedly.

"My name isn't Mr. Potter," James said, tossing his head, as though he were a child. "My name is Mr. Ragglemuffin, King of the Raggles, and I insist that you treat me as such. Where is my throne?"

Harry swallowed. That would be Snape's plan, then. I suppose he couldn't pass up a chance to humiliate his old rival.

Then he scolded himself for thinking that. He didn't know Snape's motivations, not all of them, but he knew one of them was his protection. He ought to be grateful for this, not complaining about what it could not be.

The witch stared again, then glanced sternly at Snape. "Professor, if you have cast a spell on Mr. Potter—"

"I assure you, my good woman," said Snape, "you may examine my wand, and Mr. Potter as well. I have not cast any spell that would harm him." He drew out his wand and pressed it into Madam Shiverwood's hand.

“Where is my purple cat?” James was peering about the room, and his hands were patting his knees as though to summon a reluctant animal to him. “Come here, kitty kitty kitty!” Abruptly, he caught sight of Harry, and his face brightened. “A silver cat! That will do instead.”

He bounced towards Harry and held out his arms. Harry took a step backward, unsure of what would happen if he allowed himself to be embraced, and not really wanting it, anyway. He’d got used to Draco touching him in the past few weeks, when he wanted to, and Snape putting his hand on Harry’s shoulder to guide him occasionally. Otherwise, no one else had, and Harry was fine with that.

James grabbed him anyway, practically crushing Harry’s face into his shoulder. “No,” he said. “You aren’t a silver cat, are you? You’re a bunny rabbit, a sweet little bunny rabbit!” He kissed the top of Harry’s head. “Do you want some carrots, little bunny?”

Harry unobtrusively forced magic into his muscles and managed to tear out of his father’s grip before he could feel too uncomfortable. He skipped a few steps backward and looked helplessly at Madam Shiverwood.

James lay down on the floor and began to pull off his robes, singing a nonsense song as he did so. “As I was walking among the lettuce, up came the chief of owls and he said, he said to me, oh nonya nonya no—“

“I—“ Madam Shiverwood shook her head and performed a spell on Snape’s wand that Harry recognized as Prior Incantato. A ghostly image of a giggling child welled up, confirming that Snape had cast a Cheering Charm on himself. Madam Shiverwood shook her head again, and then gave the wand back to Snape. “You were worried about this meeting, Professor Snape?” she asked.

“I was.” Snape nodded and stared at James, who was struggling and kicking at his robes as if he had forgotten all about buttons. “I see that I need not have been.” He looked at the witch and sneered. “Unless you will commit a child to the care of someone who clearly has something loose in his head?”

He doesn't have something loose in his head, Harry thought uneasily. Except what Snape put there. If they think Dad's somehow crazy, then he might lose custody of Connor, too, and who would Connor go with? Remus legally can't take him, and Snape would never agree to.

He forced down the panic that wanted to burgeon. Snape had said to trust him. Harry had to. And Snape had said at the end of May that he cared for Harry just as he was. Surely that meant that anything he did out of that affection could be excused? That it would have to be?

"Look at me!" James shouted, flipping his robes up towards his head. "Look what I can do!"

Harry swallowed his embarrassment at his father's actions and looked at Madam Shiverwood, to see her watching him.

"How do you feel about going home with your father, Harry?" she asked carefully. "The claim he filed included a petition to remove you from school, so that you might finish out your education at your family home. He said it would be safer for you than the school."

Harry sighed. "With all due respect, madam, my safety there depends on the wards," he said, looking at James. "And the wards answer to James. I don't think he can keep me safe if he's acting like this. He might let Death Eaters through under the impression that they were the Chief of the Rabbits."

"Have you ever known him to act like this before?" Madam Shiverwood asked.

Harry shook his head.

The witch looked hard at Snape, who returned her scowl with a perfectly bland expression. Then she sighed. There was anger and disappointment and disgust in the sigh, but also resignation. "I cannot send a child home with someone who acts like this," she agreed. "You may retain temporary custody of Harry, Professor Snape. We—"

"Have to pee!" James shouted.

The strong smell of urine a moment later confirmed that he wasn't kidding. Harry tried, desperately, not to look in his direction.

The witch blinked a few times, slowly, then said, "I think it best if you leave now, Professor, Harry. I shall make sure to escort Mr. Potter home." She nodded rather helplessly to Harry. "I hope that you will be happy with the professor, Harry, and that this problem will be solved as soon as possible." Her eyes slid to Snape.

Snape simply stared back, then turned and marched out of the office. Harry scrambled to catch up.

"Is it permanent, sir?" he asked, when he was sure they were far enough from the office that Madam Shiverwood couldn't hear them.

"I don't wish to tell you," said Snape.

Harry flinched from the coldness in his tone, and reminded himself, again, that he'd resolved to stop asking Snape so many questions. His guardian was busy, and always had his best intentions at heart. He took the concern and slid it under his shields. It was up to him to make sure that James wouldn't be hurt permanently by the potion. Snape couldn't be bothered.

He waited for relief and joy to bubble up, since he was still under Snape's guardianship.

When it came, it was...rather muted, really.

Harry sighed and looked away from Connor's stricken face. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I'm just going to make sure that it 's not permanent, that's all. I think I know some of the ingredients that Snape used in the potion. I recognized them by scent, and you know that he taught me about Potions theory this summer. I'm fairly sure that I can mix up an antidote soon." He turned a hopeful grin on his brother. "But, of course, Snape might even reverse it before then, once he's decided that James isn't going to come after me again."

Connor shook his head slowly and leaned against the wall outside the Great Hall, closing his eyes. "I still don't understand," he whispered.

“I—you’ve taught me, Harry, never to take pleasure in someone else’s suffering. How could you just leave him under the potion, smarting and humiliated like that?”

Harry winced. He wondered what he could have done to both keep Snape’s trust and avoid hurting his brother. It didn’t seem there was anything, so he would have to live with this consequence, too. “I’ll reverse it,” he said. “I promise.”

Connor opened his eyes and gave him a bleak look.

“Do you still want me to give you those lessons, tomorrow?” Harry asked him softly.

“Yeah, I guess,” said Connor, and shuffled into the Great Hall. Harry watched him go with a faint frown, then turned his head. The Slytherin table was filling up for dinner, and he wandered over to it with a slight feeling of disorientation. Everything had gone so well for a few days, and now...this. First failure.

Snape’s an idiot, Regulus volunteered.

Harry smiled a little in spite of himself, if only because it was so like something Sylarana would have said. What about this time? he asked, as he sat down next to Millicent and reached for the plate of bread.

Because he must have known that you’d have questions about the potion, but he didn’t bother to answer them. Regulus made what sounded like a noise of deep disgust in his throat, and Harry wondered how he could do that, since he didn’t have a throat to make it with right now. What kind of responsible adult does that?

A busy one, Harry said back, and distracted Regulus. Most people liked to talk about themselves more than they liked to talk about other people’s problems. Besides, this was a problem that needed attention. When are you going to drop the wards and let Narcissa into Grimmauld Place to search for you?

Sullen silence.

Harry sighed and spread butter on his bread. You know that you have to, sooner or later.

Peeved silence.

Harry shook his head, and looked up as he saw two post owls flap in through the windows of the Great Hall. It was almost sunset, the enchanted ceiling reflecting the shine of red and gold light through the window, and it made the owls glow as they both swooped towards him.

Harry murmured his thanks and fed the ordinary barn owl before he accepted the letter from the other owl with a grave nod. This was Julius, Lucius Malfoy's truce-owl, and it would have been an insult to feed him. He ruffled his feathers at Harry instead, and soared out the window, followed quickly by the other owl.

Harry opened the truce-letter first. It was a short message, as he had expected it would be. They were near the end of the dance.

Harry:

I look forward to seeing you again on the longest night. Meanwhile, on the night of mingled light and dark, in perfect balance, I ask you for a favor. I shall not demand that you fulfill it yet, but I ask that you keep it in mind. My gift is the chance for you to owe me a debt.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry nodded. He would ask Mr. Malfoy for a favor in return, but he would wait and think about it before he sent the letter making the formal request. After all, if he found an immediate use for the favor, he might as well use it instead of just asking for one. And he had until winter solstice, and the end of the dance, to reply.

He opened the other letter, which bore only his name on the envelope, and froze when he recognized the handwriting.

Dear Harry:

There was a Muggle poet, once. Or so they say. In truth, his family line carried wizarding blood from France, through a distant cousin of mine. He himself may have been a Squib. His minor magic doing its best to protect him would have explained how he stayed alive so often when he seemed so determined to kill himself. There was nothing he would not try: scaling Culver Cliff, swimming in cold northern waters, drinking himself nearly to death, visiting flagellation brothels.

He wrote of many strange things, strange and fabulous, but none stranger than he did long after his supposed cure and taming, his turning from Dark wildness to Light domesticity. He called it a vision, a nymph-frenzy. I think he may actually have met Pan in the woods.

Lord God of life and of light and of all things fair, he sang.

Lord God of ravin and ruin and all things dim...

There are some who watch, Harry, and know that one in power may be both “of life and of light and of all things fair,” and “of ravin and ruin and all things dim.” Never think to evade our eyes.

Evan Rosier.

Harry shook his head and put the letter on the table. Millicent snatched it up at once, and Harry couldn't even find the strength to stop her.

“Strange,” Millicent commented, and then stopped when her eyes alit on the signature. She frowned at Harry. “Why do you accept post from people who tried to kill you?”

Harry shook his head and started to respond, but in that moment, most of the last colors of sunset drained out of the sky, and pain exploded in his head, his scar.

Harry gasped, bowing his head, too startled to try and hide, and felt hands clamp on his shoulders. But that was nothing compared to the grip in his mind, squeezing and pulling as though someone would yank his brain out through the back of his skull.

He heard Regulus scream, once, in a voice so horrified and devastated that Harry tried to reach out to him, tried to follow that connection that he'd never been able to sense.

Then Regulus was gone.

Harry lay with his head on the table, panting, trying desperately to soothe the jumbled pain in his head, and hang on to his sanity, and figure out what in the hell had just happened.

Chapter Seventeen: Not-So-Private Lessons

Regulus?

There was no answer.

Harry sighed and stepped into the abandoned classroom where he'd asked Connor to meet him for his lessons in leadership. He'd been reaching out for Regulus since he vanished, trying everything he could think of, from simple shouts of his name to slurs against his family, which might bring him roaring back in anger. There was nothing, and Harry thought that if Regulus could hear him, he would have responded.

That left him being gone, or dead.

Harry shook his head with a frown as he considered the second thought and set his magic to Vanishing the dust from the desks and corners. I don't believe that. I'm nearly certain that his body is in a Black house somewhere, and the wards are tight around all of them. How would Voldemort have broken through those, as weak as he is right now? And we'd soon know if he was back in his full power. He would have come after either Connor or me first, I think, instead of Regulus.

So I think his voice is gone for right now, but not his body. Harry bit his lip and sighed. And since I have no way of contacting him as he is right now, I think I had best contact Narcissa and tell her about my suspicions. If there's any way she can still get into Grimmauld Place, then she should.

Harry was just finishing the last of the dusting when he felt the fragile quiver behind his temple that indicated Draco wanted Harry to come and help him, or sit in admiring silence at his feet, or suggest books to look in for research on Julia Malfoy and her time period. Harry hesitated for a moment, then shook his head, with slow determination. Draco knew this was the time when Harry had promised to give Connor lessons, since it was Saturday and they had no classes. Harry had explained that to him, and he was sure Draco had understood. Harry didn't see the need to leave and go to him now.

Someone knocked on the door. Connor peeked around it, and Harry found his face relaxing into a smile. His brother's company seemed positively undemanding these days, next to Snape's, where Harry had to choke back many of the tendencies that had become natural around the Potions Master, and Draco's, where Harry was still making the wrong decisions half the time, as Draco's mind changed like quicksilver.

Of course, the first thing Connor said was, "Have you found the potion that could cure Dad's madness yet?"

Harry let the smile fall away from his face, and shook his head. "No, sorry, Connor." The fact was that he knew at least two ways of finding out the potion's ingredients and brewing an antidote, but both of them would make Snape very angry. Harry fought a small battle every day about whether risking his guardian's anger was worth letting his father suffer. The part of him that said he shouldn't make Snape angry was losing, slowly but steadily.

Connor sighed. "Let's just—"

The door creaked open again, and Ron stuck his head in. "Room for two?" he asked, when he caught Harry's eye.

Harry blinked. "I suppose so. But why?" He wouldn't have thought that Ron was very interested in the kinds of history and philosophy that Harry aimed to teach Connor, or at least knew about some of it already, through living in a pureblood family.

"Connor said that you're a good teacher, when you want to be." Ron shrugged and padded over to sit down at one of the tables, idly running his fingers over the clean surface. "And I'm bored. It's not going to be the same without Quidditch this year, you know." He said that with a deep disgust in his tone.

"They're not letting us play?" Harry reflected that nearly everyone else seemed to know more about what went on in the school than he did. Of course, he'd been busy with Snape and Draco and trying to find Regulus and writing suggestions to Skeeter for another article on

the Minister in the past few days, but he wouldn't have thought he would miss an announcement like that.

Ron gave him a sharp look. "Yes. And the Headmaster just smiled mysteriously and refused to explain why. You must have heard him say that, Harry. It was just at dinner last night."

"Oh," said Harry, remembering. He'd been helping Draco research necromancy last night, and had lost track of enough time that he missed dinner. He shrugged. "Sorry, but I wonder why? You're absolutely sure that the Headmaster didn't say?" That might explain why the professors, except Snape, had been gossiping about lately, but Harry didn't see why the banning of Quidditch would concern anyone save the Heads of House.

"Just said that we'd understand later." Ron dropped his head on the desk. "I know he's a great man and all—Dad says he's brilliant—but he's barmy sometimes."

Harry privately agreed with that assessment. "All right, then, let's—"

The door creaked again, and Hermione came in, taking a place at a desk. Unlike Ron, she seemed to notice how clean it was, but she just raised an eyebrow at Harry and pulled a piece of parchment, her quill, and her inkwell out of the bag she was carrying, which Harry would normally expect to be full of books.

"And what are you doing here?" Harry asked. If there's one student in school that doesn't need extra lessons, it's Hermione.

"I'll go if you don't want me here," said Hermione.

Harry looked at her hard, hearing an injured tone in her voice. He sighed when he recognized it. It was true that he'd been rather neglecting Hermione lately. He didn't know how to make up for it. Politics and talking to Fawkes—who could only offer a limited array of chirps without a house elf to translate—and Draco and Snape had consumed a lot of his time, that was true, but he could still have found some hours to spend with her.

"No, that's fine," he said. "But I would have thought that you already knew everything I did."

Hermione's scowl grew pronounced. "I would have thought the library would have more information on pureblood rituals than it does," she muttered. "Too many of the books just say something like And of course this connects to the Rite of the Scorpion that the Starrise family performed on full moon nights of victory over their enemies, but then they don't explain what the Rite of the Scorpion is. I'm sure I'm missing a lot, and I have to know the whole thing."

Harry relaxed. Hermione's motivation was easier to deal with, at least. He wondered how she'd missed getting into Ravenclaw. "Well, teaching three people won't be much different than teaching one, I suppose."

"Six."

Harry raised his eyebrows as Cho entered, nodding cheerfully at him. Luna wandered in just behind her, giving Harry a rather vague smile. Padma Patil followed both of them. Harry eyed her warily, but if she had any of her sister Parvati's tendency to giggle, it didn't show in the way she carefully arranged her books and parchment on one of the desks.

"All right, then." Harry didn't ask why they'd come. They were Ravenclaws, and Ravenclaws who genuinely seemed to enjoy learning, from what he'd seen of them. "Then I'll start." He began, giving the classroom door one more suspicious look, but this time it didn't seem inclined to admit more people.

"I wanted to ask my brother who he thinks the main people he'd have to persuade to follow him are." He fastened his gaze on Connor, feeling no remorse at putting his brother on the spot. It was time Connor learned to deal with some of the attention that had been flicking away from him this year, as people whispered and giggled about Harry's abduction.

Connor flushed. "I, ah. Dark wizards?"

Harry cocked his head. "You think of them as a block?"

"Aren't they?"

Harry shook his head. "Dark wizards don't all want the same thing, and they don't even all share the same allegiance," he said, falling easily into the patterns of the book learning he'd had from his mother. "Really, there are two kinds of Dark wizards, even though they both get lumped together as the same thing most of the time. There are declared ones, sworn to a Dark Lord or some ideal—an ill-defined one, really—of keeping Dark magic legal. Then there are just wizards and witches who will use Dark spells." Hermione's quill was speeding across her parchment, Harry noticed in amusement. Well, he supposed he couldn't blame her. She studied everything, and their Defense Against the Dark Arts professors so far hadn't covered much of the history of how Dark and Light magic appeared among the wizarding families. "Both often practice what are called the Dark rituals and the Dark pureblood dances of manners. Then there are the same distinctions for Light wizards, except, of course, that they often follow Light Lords, and fight to keep everything the same as it has been a few centuries, since the last Minister who really tolerated Dark magic. Their rituals are different."

Hermione looked up, the dawning of consciousness in her eyes. "That was why I was finding so many different rituals," she whispered. "Some of them were Light, and some Dark."

Harry nodded. "As to how they're connected, and whether a certain ritual is Light or Dark...well, they might depend on free will or compulsion. Or they might depend on taming, bridling, and confining, or letting loose, freeing, unbinding. Or they might be concerned with identifying the truth, which is defined as Light magic, or hiding and subterfuge, which is Dark."

Connor, Harry saw, was following with a frown, and looking as though he wished he had brought some parchment. "But lots of people use glamours or illusions, and those aren't called Dark Arts," he said.

Harry nodded again. "They aren't called that. They are Dark, but only under one definition of the term. There are lots of definitions. Another

one is the Light magic is often cooperative, done with many wizards working together, while many Dark spells and arts are solitary.”

Hermione scribbled that down, too. “I knew that,” she said defensively, when Harry looked at her. “But the way you explain it is a lot simpler and clearer.”

Only she would think that, Harry thought with amusement, and then looked over Hermione’s bowed head, something he was just getting used to being tall enough to do. Well, her and the Ravenclaws. Ron and Connor looked nearly overwhelmed. “I’ve had time to think about it, and to study it.”

Hermione gave him a long, slow look. “I heard something about that,” she said. “But not everything in detail. Why do you know so much about Dark Arts and spells and rituals, Harry?”

“Lucky, I guess,” said Harry. “And I have a really good memory. I usually only have to read a book once to remember most of the information.” It was true, as it happened, but it slid him neatly past the awkward moment when the Ravenclaw girls might have started asking why he’d been trained so much as a child. Harry was uncomfortable with them knowing what they might already, that he’d been trained as Connor’s protector. He was not going to get into the phoenix web or what they would probably want to call abuse. They were sure not to understand what it had really been like. “So, Connor, you’ll have to persuade Dark wizards declared and unaligned, and Light wizards declared and unaligned, and then of course those families and individual wizards who aren’t either.”

“And where do Muggleborns fit into all this?” Hermione asked. Harry thought she was honestly curious. It wasn’t the kind of thing that most people talked about openly in Hogwarts, except maybe in Muggle Studies, wary as they were of stepping straight into subjects no one wanted to be forced to take a side on.

“Depends on whether or not they stay in the wizarding world, and where,” said Harry. “Sometimes they declare for Dark or Light. Sometimes they marry into a family which has an allegiance, and adopt that. Sometimes they use both Dark and Light magic, anything

short of the Unforgivable Curses, and stay in the middle. And a lot of them go back to the Muggle world, of course.”

Hermione shook her head. “That’s stupid.”

“I quite agree, Granger,” said a sharp voice from the doorway. “No sense in wasting education on people who are only going to misuse it.”

Harry jerked his head up. This time, he hadn’t heard the door creak. Draco was standing there, looking straight at him, and his face was furious.

Harry lowered his head, and piled shields on top of shields. He had been irritated at Draco for forgetting that he was going to spend the morning with Connor. But why had he been irritated? Of course Draco would want him to be there anyway.

He could feel his whole mind shifting and changing, adapting itself into the small quiet thing that it usually was of late around Draco, but a glance at his friend’s face showed that was not going to be enough. Draco tapped a finger on his book. Perhaps he’d been spoiled, but he’d got quite used to Harry showing up whenever he wanted him; he’d accepted that Harry was probably watching him by magical means for any such occurrence. And this was taking much longer than it should have, even if he was down in the Great Hall or out on the Quidditch Pitch when Draco thought about him.

Then he remembered that Harry had said something about teaching Connor lessons in leadership this morning.

As if that prat could learn anything, Draco thought, and stood, storming out of the library. He went to the classroom that Harry had used to try and “educate” Connor last year. They would be there, if they were anywhere. Harry had to learn that sometimes Draco needed him, too.

Except that they weren’t there, and it took an unconscionably long time of wandering among the empty classrooms until Draco found

them. By then, his temper was near the boiling point, and he entered just after some crack by Granger about how it would be stupid for Mudbloods to go back to the Muggle world. Draco felt compelled to agree with her.

He looked at Harry.

For a moment, a stir of unease struck him as he watched Harry's eyes widen and then drop from his face, and how his posture changed, flowing from an almost teacher-like one to one that Draco could well imagine standing or sitting near him, poised to give but not attract attention. It rather reminded him of last year, when Harry had sometimes acted like that around his brother. If there was one person whom Draco didn't want to be compared to, it was Connor Potter.

But then he shook off the idea. Harry was probably just apologetic for wasting his time here when he could have been with Draco. And hadn't Draco given him a lot of attention last year, and gone dashing off to his side whenever Harry wanted? It was nothing more than Harry owed him in return.

"Come here," he said, walking towards Harry.

Weasley was on his feet in an instant, getting between him and Harry. Draco sneered at him. He didn't have much time for Weasley. He had Harry and the potion to brew, and the potion and Harry, and that was enough for him right now. Oh, sure, sometimes he did talk to other people, because he couldn't spend all his time researching the potion or talking to Harry, but those people certainly didn't include Weasley.

"Out of the way," he said.

Weasley had the audacity to shake his head. His face was bright and flushed. Draco hoped, spitefully, that he had some idea of how unattractive he looked, despite the fact that he couldn't give him that much credit for intelligence. "How can you just order Harry around like that?" he demanded. "You can't just order him around like that."

Draco blinked. "I wasn't giving him an order. I was just telling him how things were going to be." He was sure that he had given Harry a

choice with his tone. It hadn't been an order or a command. He knew that Harry would despise orders or commands, and that he spent as much time as he did with Draco because he genuinely wanted to spend time with him, nothing else. "Come on, Harry," he added, making sure his voice was coaxing this time, looking over Weasley's shoulder. Harry still didn't meet his gaze. "You do want to come work with me, don't you?"

Harry didn't respond. Draco could feel the anger bubbling up in his chest again. He needed Harry's help, and he didn't need Harry spending his time with these tossers, among whom, he saw with a faint sneer, was the Chang bitch. Why would Harry want to spend time with them, anyway? It wasn't as though they were his friends who'd risked their lives for him again and again, or who loved him the way that Draco did.

And if any of them do, they better not come near him.

Sometimes Draco felt as if he didn't understand his own mind through the dizzying swirl of emotions and ambitions that occupied it, but what he did understand told him distinctly that Harry was his and no one else's. He'd felt that for years, really, but now he knew why, and he wasn't about to let the realization go again.

The thing that really puzzled Draco was why Harry wasn't saying anything about this. He should have been, if he was so interested in coming to work with Draco, but he only sat there, his head bowed and drooping, his eyes on the floor. He seemed to be taking several deep breaths, as if to stave off a panic attack. But Draco knew when Harry's panic attacks happened. They happened after he was possessed by evil Dark Lords or when he had too many people staring at him. Neither was true now, so it couldn't be a panic attack.

"Come on, Harry," he said again, feeling angry at having to repeat himself.

A voice from the doorway said, "Merlin, but you're a pompous git, Malfoy."

If there was one thing that offended Zacharias Smith, it was lack of intelligence.

He was willing to concede that some people didn't know much about some things (from his experience at Hogwarts, "some people" amounted to "most of the other students"), but that ignorance could be corrected. If someone wanted to know something, they could ask. If someone realized they didn't know something, and no one else did either, they could seek to remedy the lack themselves. There was a library upstairs, and minds residing in the professors' heads, or at least most of them. Zacharias did not believe in native stupidity. It was only ignorance, what you got when other people didn't care enough to educate themselves.

But he did believe in a kind of willful stupidity, and he saw it in full flight when he wandered by the classroom where, just maybe, on the slimmest of chances, he might have seen Hermione Granger heading about ten minutes ago.

It offended him more than anything else in the world to see Draco Malfoy standing in front of Harry Potter and talking as if it wasn't perfectly obvious that Potter was going into what his great-grandmother called avuluchia. Zacharias considered that she knew what she was talking about, being a Veela and everything, and here it was. Potter wanted to do two things, very badly, and neither side was letting up, sending him into mental paralysis.

Merlin, Malfoy ought to have known something was wrong just by the way he's looking at the floor. Potter doesn't do that.

"Merlin, but you're a pompous git, Malfoy," Zacharias drawled, stepping through the door and leaning against it. His eyes lingered on Hermione as she turned to stare at the door, but that was just coincidence, really. And if he happened to notice that she had most of a parchment covered in writing, and wanted to nod in approval, what of it? Being smart was nothing to sneer at. "What gives you the right to treat Potter like your little plush dragon? Real wizards give up on playing with those dragons when they're six."

Malfoy flushed. Zacharias nodded, happy to have his suspicions confirmed. "You didn't, did you? You were probably playing with it

until you got your Hogwarts letter, and then you put it away and pretended that you'd never heard of it."

"Shut up, Smith," Malfoy had the gall to hiss, as if he really thought he could shut someone up who had more than a scattering of intelligence that way. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, I do," said Zacharias, and stepped into the classroom. He noticed three Ravenclaws there, all girls of good family, good Light wizarding stock, and nodded to them. Really, Malfoy was an idiot, and not acting like one, to believe that Potter would be unsafe with this lot.

But he didn't believe in native idiocy, only in native ignorance, so that meant he could help educate Malfoy out of it.

Zacharias smiled. He was going to enjoy this.

"You put your little plush dragon away only a day before you got your Hogwarts letter, or the hour after it," he said, directing his attention to Malfoy again. Pompous git. Braggart, throwing his money and his weight around. I wonder if his father ever told him that his great-grandfather was one of the poorest purebloods around for a long time? Illegal gambling won most of the Malfoy property back, and ever since then, they've been acting as though they're old money. Old name, new money, not a lick of common sense. "And then it turned out not to matter, because you immediately found another plush dragon when you got here. You've been hanging on Potter as though he could grant your every wish."

Zacharias paused to study the wizard who, by now, had looked up and was staring hard at him. Potter's magic beat around him like a stream barely dammed, a river peering over the top of the obstruction and ready to flow. "Well," Zacharias amended, "he probably could grant your every wish."

He brought his gaze back to Malfoy's face. "But that doesn't mean that you get to ask him to try, you know. A Lord belongs to everybody. So does a vates." His great-grandmother had told him about the vates, during all the long days when Zacharias had sat by her chair

with the instruction to “learn something.” Zacharias had surely learned something. “So he doesn’t get to just educate one person, or grant the wishes of one person. That’s selfishness on your part, and it would be on his. He gets to belong to the whole of the wizarding world, and lavish his magic on the people he chooses to lavish it on.”

Zacharias looked back at Potter, and if he chose to admire Hermione’s face on the way, no one was there to notice. There were no natively stupid people, but Zacharias believed firmly that some people were more intelligent and observant than others, and of the people in this room, only Hermione was his match. She was allowed to notice his looking, if she wanted to.

Potter’s eyes were fastened steadily on his now, and he seemed to be asking what, exactly, Zacharias wanted.

Heavens, he’s not that far gone, is he? Zacharias frowned in thought. Maybe he was. He hadn’t known that Malfoy’s plush-dragoning of the other wizard had pushed Potter like this, or he would have interfered sooner.

Well, now he could.

“I give you permission to use Legilimency on me, Potter,” he said. “I know you know it. Look into my mind, and see if I’m not speaking the truth about why the way Malfoy treats you is evil.”

“Shut up, Smith!” Malfoy spat again, and took a step forward, his hands helplessly clenched.

Zacharias gave him a cool look. He could defend himself, if necessary. He didn’t think he should depend on Potter to do it. “You shut up, Malfoy,” he said. “You owe courtesy and precedent to a wizard as powerful as Potter, at least until he decides to decline the invitation to look into my mind.”

He glanced back at Potter, who was looking helplessly at Malfoy. “Potter?” he asked.

Harry glanced at him in turn, and Zacharias narrowed his eyes. Oh, honestly. How hesitant can someone with strength like that get? When he's past this, I'm going to pick at him with everything in me. No one can afford for him to be this weak.

"Come on, Potter," he said. "It's a simple enough spell. One word, and I give you my full permission." He summoned the memories that he wanted Potter to see to the forefront of his mind. He didn't know Occlumency, but he knew that it would make it easiest for a wizard entering an unfamiliar mind if he didn't have to dig for memories. Zacharias was not keen on having it hurt him, either.

Potter whispered, "Legilimens."

Zacharias felt an odd twisting and pushing, as though someone had slid through an outer curtain to his thoughts he hadn't even been aware was there. He braced himself not to fight the intrusion, but after that first sensation, there was nothing appreciable. He braced himself with his hands on a desk and hummed, waiting.

The memories were right there, easily accessed.

"But I don't know what you mean, Grandma," said Zacharias, sitting at the Veela's feet in a fall of sunlight. Her room was always lit, enough to touch Zacharias's heart and cheer him up even on days when the winter sky was faint and pasty everywhere else. Here, the light was golden.

"I mean a vates, my dear, a creature of magic and freedom so extreme that nothing can contain her." Her hand smoothed across his forehead, and Zacharias shivered. He was too young to know much about what Veela could do, but because he was her blood, she could soothe and enchant him with a touch. "She has to know herself inside and out, and she'll lose her position in a moment if she tries to make someone do something she doesn't want to do, but when she's here, she'll heal and free all those poor creatures bound in webs to this day."

Zacharias thought ahead, even at that age. "But what happens if the vates is weak, or shuts herself in a cage?"

Grandma's voice went sad and cold, both at once. "Then she is dead, and something of beauty and freedom is forever lost to the world."

Potter pulled out of his head, and Zacharias opened his eyes as the memory ended. He saw Potter's trembling, and shook his head, clucking his tongue. Perhaps a bit of spurring right now wouldn't go amiss.

"Really, Potter," he said. "Did you think that no one else had noticed, that no one else would question it when suddenly you started acting differently?"

"He's just acting the way I wanted him to act," Malfoy said.

Zacharias gave him a smirk. Malfoy sounded like a pathetic little boy. "We did notice," he told Potter. "There's an awful lot of people at this school who notice everything you do. Everything. And we're not about to have our chance at a Lord, or something even better, ruined because you want to go and hide in a cage. I'm going to poke you with a stick until you get out of the cage. You'll have to find some other solution than hiding, Potter."

"And what if hiding is what other people want me to do?" Potter whispered, barely loud enough for Zacharias to hear him. "If I have to be their servant and their protector, then shouldn't I hide?"

"Then they're stupid," said Zacharias, and decided that perhaps he could believe in stupid people after all. "If they really do that, if they really want that, then they're destroying something that could flood their lives with light, too. How moronic would you have to be, to do that?" He looked sideways again, and added, "Well, you could be a moron or you could be Malfoy, who's worse."

Malfoy spat at him. Zacharias grinned. It'd been days since he had a good argument.

Hermione was nodding along with him, he saw. He felt a warm flush traveling up his chest that he dismissed as pride. It was good to see

that the smartest witch in school could recognize good sense when she saw it.

Malfoy wasn't able to get his tongue yet, so Zacharias went on speaking to Potter, while locking his eyes with his future opponent. "You're too needed, Potter. You're going to have to balance what people want out of you with what other people want out of you, just as some magical creature should already have told you. They're not Malfoys. They can recognize what you are."

On the other hand, perhaps none of them were quite as bright as I am.

"And anyway, if they haven't, I'm telling it to you now," Zacharias added. "Be a friend, but be a vates and a Lord." He knew that "Lord" wasn't quite right, but he didn't know what the equivalent of a vates would be for wizards, or even if it had a name. "Stop letting people make a plush dragon out of you."

He could feel Potter's breathing growing swifter, his magic surging like the tide. Then Potter stood up and ran out of the room.

Malfoy moved to follow, but Zacharias was already busy tearing into him. "Perhaps I had it the wrong way around, didn't I, Malfoy? Perhaps he has you on a string. The dragon leading the moron, now there's a change."

Of course he had to turn around and answer that. Zacharias grinned, content. He was taking someone who definitely deserved it down a peg or two, Potter had listened to him and might stop acting like a toy, and Hermione was giggling behind her hand at his insults.

All was right with the world.

Harry leaned against the wall and panted for breath. He didn't know where he was exactly—somewhere on the third floor. He hadn't bothered to keep track as he ran. His mind was what occupied him, whirling with thoughts and ideas he hadn't considered before like sparks of light in a broken window.

Oh, he had thought some of them, but somehow, they hadn't impacted heavily on him. Harry closed his eyes, ran a hand through his hair, and took a deep breath. The glass shards flashed and cut deep.

I know that Snape and Draco matter, but they can't matter more than everybody else in the world. Why was I acting as though they did? I never would have, only a few months ago. No, only a month ago. Before Snape got so worried about me that he had to change his behavior, I would never have stood for...

And a whole bunch of things he would never have stood for stormed through his brain: Draco shoving his friends away, Draco dictating where he spent his time, Snape ordering him around the way he had, Snape humiliating his father.

So why am I standing for it now?

He knew the answer. He'd wanted to make up for his past behavior, the behavior that had made Snape and Draco so worried about him. He'd wanted to show them that he cared and yes, he could do what they wanted, be an entirely undemanding ward and friend, not take everything for himself, the way that he had been so far. He'd stumbled so badly in the past that he wanted to make sure he didn't stumble again.

But he had. He'd swung the balance, and overcorrected it.

Harry grimaced to himself and rubbed at one arm, where he could almost feel the truth making him bleed.

And I forgot. I forgot what I swore to myself in the Owlery when Connor freed my magic from the last of the phoenix web, what I swore to myself when I found out that I could be vates. I have to know myself. I have to know when I'm lying or making mistakes.

And this was a lie and mistake, both.

Harry hung his head for a moment, but already he could feel a stirring impatience inside him. He didn't want to go on mourning his mistakes. It was time to go about correcting them.

But what can I do? If I just change back again, that won't do any good, either, because that would deprive Snape and Draco of things they need. And I never want to take them for granted again.

Harry had to consider for only a few moments, though. He'd been put in Slytherin for a reason. And he had done something very similar to what he now planned in the past, when he had concealed certain gifts and tendencies even from Lily.

I can hide, but not in a cage, the way Zacharias put it—with masks. I can make sure that Snape and Draco still have what they want, what they need. And I can give other people what they want just by acting differently when I'm around them. When something happens to me that they wouldn't want to know about, I can just not tell them. If Snape and Draco start driving into other people's free wills or interfering with something I need to do as vates, then I can lie.

It was such a simple solution, so breathtaking, that Harry blinked, and wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

But he knew the answer even to that one, of course. Because I was so desperate for affection from Snape and Draco. I didn't want them to abandon me. I thought I had to do this so they wouldn't.

And that was a mistake. I got along perfectly fine with just a word of approval here and there when I was with Lily. I can do the same thing now.

Harry sucked in air until he could feel his chest bending to hold it all, and then blew it out. He draped his Occlumency shields over his mind again, since he could hear footsteps hastening towards him.

"Harry?" Draco came around the corner, his face wounded. "Why did you abandon me like that?"

“Sorry, Draco,” Harry said softly, and moved forward to hug the other boy. He could feel Draco’s startlement in the stiffening of his shoulders, but he ignored that. Draco needed to be hugged more often. That was something Harry still didn’t do a lot. “I thought you would be angry at me because Zacharias was attacking you through me.”

“No, no,” said Draco, his face radiating happiness. “Let’s just go and work on the potion again, all right? And can you promise me that you won’t listen to Smith anymore? What he said was stupid anyway.”

“Of course, Draco,” said Harry, the lie coming easily to his lips. He would remember it, and in this state, when he was with Draco and what Draco needed, it was an easy promise to keep.

He could do this. He had a very good memory. And he’d had rather a lot of practice at deception in the last few years. So long as he could give other people what they wanted and needed, there should be no harm in this.

And I’m watching myself now. The moment I see harm—and surely I’ll fail again—I’ll correct myself. This is for the best.

And, soon, I’ll write the letter to Narcissa and make sure Snape doesn’t find out about the way I’m going to reverse the potion against James. He’ll only be angry if he finds out.

Interlude: Answers to the Calling

Malfoy Manor

September 22nd, 1994

Dear allies (for so I hope I may call you, though the link we share is Harry Potter and not anything more formal):

I think it is time for another gathering. The Minister has not yet been hooked out of office, for all that he flops like a landed fish. I have had word from a certain friend within the Ministry that the Starrises are growing closer to him, lending him the cloak of their reputation, and they may yet be able to draw him out of trouble. No one has been able to find any grime that stains that cloak of light, and believe me, I have tried.

I am sensitive to the difficulties that attend our travel to and meeting in one place, as well as the friends some of us have who would be most anxious for us to stay at home. To evade their gazes, I suggest we meet in Hogwarts itself, rather than force young Mr. Potter to come to us, on a night when no one would be surprised to see strangers on the grounds. May I suggest Halloween? There were ghosts in the corridors quite often when I was a student there. I suspect we may be both more silent and more dangerous than ever they were.

Awaiting your response,

Lucius Malfoy.
Wyvern's Nest

September 24th, 1994

Dear Lucius:

I find myself both charmed and offended that you would send me a letter you have duplicated with a charm, instead of written out yourself.

I must question when you have sent me this letter. It is true that I have met the boy, but I am hardly part of a circle of allies around him. I have only met him once, and that is not enough time to judge anyone thoroughly, even a powerful wizard. And I did not share the rather tight bond that once connected some of you. Why did you send me this letter? Answer that, and I might consider joining this gathering.

Eagerly awaiting enlightenment,

Arabella Zabini.
Malfoy Manor

September 25th, 1994

Dear Arabella:

The answers as to why I wished you to attend this gathering are very simple.

You have a son in Slytherin. I think you would know some things about Potter that most people do not, simply from his observations, and those could be used to supplement your own judgment.

Potter is a powerful Dark wizard. You are a Dark witch. There will not come another such chance—not in our lifetimes, certainly, perhaps not for three hundred years—to change the status of Dark magic so decisively.

I have had the chance to observe Potter closely on several occasions, and I can assure you, he has more qualities than he thinks he does. He will be a leader, but he will require advisers who know more about the world than he does, who know how to wield those qualities when he does not, who can direct all that immense magic towards worthy goals.

Finally, while it is true that you were not part of our merry little band thirteen years ago, it is not only those friends of mine that Potter is

drawing in. He will reach many wizards, and many magical creatures, before all is done.

Are you interested?

Lucius Malfoy.
Wyvern's Nest

September 27th, 1994

Dear Lucius:

Indeed, you interest me. And Blaise has just reported something about Potter that interests me immensely. It appears that the future may be more open than I thought it would be. I accept your invitation.

Cordially,

Arabella Zabini.
Blackstone

September 25th, 1994

Dear Lucius:

I will certainly be there. I am young Harry's formal ally, and he will not have such a gathering unless I am in attendance. It would be wrong, and rude, and I am quite certain that Mr. Potter does not mean to be either wrong or rude to me.

Elfrida will be attending as well. It is true that by that time she will be five months pregnant, but she wishes to make a certain request of Potter. After hearing what her request is, I can only agree to it and wish her well in getting him to agree to it. I am certain he will. It would be wrong and rude of him to do otherwise.

Do you know a place in Hogwarts where we might go without everyone coming and gaping at my wife?

Yours in comradeship, under the brand and beyond it,

Adalrico Bulstrode.
Malfoy Manor

September 28th, 1994

Dear Adalrico:

Your attendance, as well as Elfrida's, gladdens my heart. I have received a formal letter from Mr. Potter, and I can assure you that he needs this meeting as much as we do. He has strength, so much of it, but there are unworthy corners that he will shed it into, just as the moon must shine on the intelligent and the discourteous alike. I am going to answer the letter, but not tell him about the meeting yet. I have the impression that it would not be wise to give him much time to object.

The Room of Requirement in Hogwarts will suffice for our meeting, I think.

Yours in comradeship both old and new,

Lucius Malfoy.
The Garden

September 30th, 1994

Dear Lucius:

I agree that a formal meeting would be a good idea, though I think you are underestimating Mr. Potter. He could arrange one himself if he wished for one. However, my husband has given his approval to the meeting as well, and most especially to the date, though he will not come with me himself to meet Mr. Potter. He says that it would not be proper.

Tell me, Lucius, because I am interested, and because I am another who once ran with you when we both served our Lord: what do you hope to gain from the boy? I do not think that you care only about having Cornelius gone from office, no matter how he has insulted you. He has served you at other times. Besides, with the political climate the way it is, you know that the majority of the public will only choose another Light-declared Minister, and changes that favor us will come about slowly, if at all.

What is it?

Cordially,

Hawthorn Parkinson
Malfoy Manor

October 2nd, 1994

Dear Hawthorn:

In the name of comradeship, and because my Narcissa assures me that you already know anyway, I will tell you. You may have seen the way my son behaves towards Potter. I have witnessed and heard about it now, and I am largely convinced that it is genuine. It may turn or change sometime in the next years, but even then, an alliance with Potter would still be a good idea. I cannot foresee the Minister, or Dumbledore, or even our Lord, lasting long in the world that Potter's power creates around him every moment of every day.

And, who knows? We may find ourselves facing a much closer alliance than that in a few years, when the boys know their own magic well enough.

We will be meeting in the Room of Requirement in Hogwarts—which reminds me, I must send a letter to Arabella. Excuse me.

Sincerely,

Lucius Malfoy.

Dragon's Eye

October 10th, 1994

Truly, Lucius, I am disappointed in you. I gave you a few weeks to send me an invitation to the gathering of Dark wizards on Halloween to meet young Mr. Potter. And I received nothing. It is not like you to be so discourteous.

Never mind. My eyes have revealed it, as you must have suspected they would. Perhaps your not sending me an invitation is a mark of great respect instead, because you knew that I would spy out the meeting and saw no need to repeat yourself in informing me. I think I shall take it as a sign of that respect, so that I do not need to kill you.

I will see you on Halloween. I am excited. I have not seen you in several years, after all.

Acies Lestrangle.

Chapter Eighteen: Never Underestimate a House Elf

Harry stamped his feet and shivered. He had never realized it was so immensely cold in the dungeons at night. Then again, he was usually either under his blankets or in the Slytherin common room in front of a roaring fire.

He wasn't lingering near Snape's offices, under cover of a Disillusionment Charm, just waiting for the answer that he hoped would come tonight. He had sent the letter as soon as he thought of the plan. Was Lucius offended, perhaps? Was he not going to reply to the request after all? Was he—

Harry nearly jumped in surprise when he heard the crack of Apparition next to him. He looked around hastily, and saw Dobby standing calmly next to him. The house elf gave him a nod, apparently easily able to see through the Disillusionment Charm.

"Dobby is here to help Harry Potter," he said, and then handed over two letters, both of which bore his name. Harry recognized the handwriting on one as Narcissa's, and opened that one first, since he already knew what Lucius's would say.

Dear Harry:

I am indeed concerned about Regulus, and saddened that my stubborn cousin did not lower the wards before he vanished or died (we must face the possibility that he is now dead). I would be happy to meet you at No. 12 Grimmauld Place, though I cannot promise you that we will be able to get inside. The wards I encountered when I last tried to visit were immensely strong, as they are when protecting the true heir of the family. But if you wish to meet me there and try to enter, I would welcome the chance. Perhaps in a few weekends? I am dancing until then.

Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry relaxed with a small sigh. At least he would be doing something that might possibly help Regulus, though he wasn't sure, based on

Narcissa's description of the wards, that it would manage to actually help.

He opened Lucius's letter then, while Dobby waited patiently, looking around as though he found the dungeon corridor fascinating.

Dear Mr. Potter:

I will not even pretend to understand why you wish to borrow my house elf for the evening. But your favor is granted, as your autumnal equinox gift from me. Keep in mind that there is one step in the dance left, and one only. I already know which gift I most hope to receive at Midwinter.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry rolled his eyes and folded the letter. Arrogant as always, Lucius. I think that's his natural state of being. He looked at Dobby. "Dobby, do you want to be here and help me?" he asked. Never mind that the truce-dance had compelled him to approach Lucius formally to ask for the house elf's help; he would do nothing that went against Dobby's natural will and inclinations.

"Dobby wants to be here and helping," said Dobby calmly. "Dobby read the letter that Mr. Harry sent to Master Malfoy." He leaned forward and regarded Harry with that stern force that Harry was always surprised could hide in the eyes of a house elf. "This service that he wishes for Dobby's help on sounds dangerous. Dobby will protect Harry Potter."

Harry coughed, embarrassed. "I hope it's not going to be dangerous, Dobby," he said. "We shouldn't meet anyone in there."

"In where, Harry Potter?" Dobby let his eyes widen for the first time, making him look more like a typical house elf. "Is Dobby going into a dragon's lair in the Forbidden Forest?"

"No—"

"Is Dobby hunting unicorns for their blood?"

“No—“

“Is Dobby—“ Dobby took a deep breath and lowered his voice. “Is Dobby going into the Slytherin rooms to find Master Draco’s trousers?”

Harry gave Dobby an odd look. Sometimes he felt as if everyone else understood something immense and shifting around him that he did not. There were remarks he was sure would make sense, if just seen in a context that he didn’t know how to view. “No, Dobby,” he said. “We’re sneaking into Professor Snape’s office to retrieve some notes on a potion. I don’t think he should be in there, since he went to bed early tonight.” Harry told himself that he did not feel guilty about the very mild sleeping draught he’d put in Snape’s goblet during their last few training sessions. It had to be mild, or Snape would have sensed it, and would probably be immune to it. All it really did was make Snape yawn and bed sound delicious to him. He had stayed up late at least once, brewing in his lab and making Harry ache in agony in case Dobby came that night. “Just a quick trip in and out, but I need you with me in case I encounter any magic I can’t deal with.” And he thought he might. He knew something about the Dark spells that Snape used to defend his lab, but not all of them.

“Why is Harry Potter sneaking into Professor Snape’s lab?” Dobby whispered. “Dobby thought that Professor Snape was Harry Potter’s friend.”

Harry hesitated. What Dobby said had been true, and still was true—up to a point. In a certain mindset. When Harry was near Snape and draped himself with Occlumency shields to hide his inappropriate emotions towards his guardian, then he could believe that what Snape was doing was good and right. When he was away, and let the emotions break through, he knew that he had to do something to help James, and if that meant stealing the potion notes from Snape’s lab, then that was what he would do.

Besides, the only other option would have been using Legilimency on Snape and finding his memory of brewing the potion. Harry did not want to force his will on his guardian, and he suspected he couldn’t

do it without being caught, anyway. And Snape's wrath would be terrible to behold if he caught Harry trying to read his mind. Despite the risks of the spells Snape might have on his lab, this was still safer.

"He is my friend," said Harry, deciding on the truth. "But he did something I think is bad. Um, sometimes I think it's bad. Maybe." He didn't know if he could accurately describe the state of his mind to anyone anymore, even to himself. He'd become so good at ducking in and out of his shields, making himself into a different person around different people—calm or agitated or active or passive as needed—in just a few days that he sometimes felt as if he were made of masks. He just needed to open a box and pick out the appropriate one, and he would be ready to face whoever required his help at the moment.

"Dobby understands," said Dobby, with a small bow. "Master Malfoy often does things that Dobby thinks is bad, but Dobby still obeys."

Harry blinked, then decided that he should be honored to be compared to a house elf, not angered, and headed towards the door to Snape's office. "Come on," he whispered, and extended one hand. "Acclaro."

The lines of spells and wards sprang into being around the office door. Harry grimaced. Given Snape's skill in potions, he couldn't even be sure that this was all of the protections. He cocked his head and studied the ones that he recognized, including the leafy green of a Repelling Spell under the thick blue lines of a spell that would preserve an image of anyone who walked through the door when Snape wasn't there.

He could dispel most of the magic, but for all he knew, that might trip alarms in Snape's mind that would break through the fragile barrier of the sleeping potion.

Then he paused, remembering a description of a spell he'd read about in a history of the First War. For a long time, the Aurors hadn't been able to figure out how the Death Eaters were escaping their traps. Then they realized that the Death Eaters were able to exile the effects of all their spells from a certain, small area, and Apparate or

touch a Portkey just inside that area. The spell was fragile and would collapse the moment the Death Eater was gone, but in the meantime it would banish the magic and—this was the part that had interested Harry—not alert any Aurors that their spells were being disrupted.

He only needed the spell to last long enough to let him step through a door.

“Finite Incantatem Glomero!”

The magic surged through him, an unfamiliar thrill, the way it always was when he tried a spell for the first time, and then a sphere of expanding air opened around his hand and pushed steadily outward. Harry was already sweating with the effort of holding it. Of course, he’d never done this before, and he’d done it wandless, besides. I really ought to have used my wand, he thought, as he watched the wards and spells on the door disappear one by one.

At last the sphere was as big as the door, and Harry stepped through, with Dobby close on his heels. The door swung shut behind them, and Harry released the sphere with a hiss. He remembered hazily that it had been harder for the Death Eaters to raise the spell when the Aurors trying to confine them were strong wizards. The sheer power and age of the spells on Snape’s door probably had something to do with his inability to maintain the sphere.

Dobby tapped him on the shoulder. Harry jumped and looked back.

Dobby regarded him carefully. “In future,” he squeaked, “Dobby will be happy to Apparate Harry Potter past the door.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. I didn’t even think of asking him. “Thank you, Dobby,” he said, as he turned to study the Potions lab. “I hope that we should only have to do this once, though.”

The only light in the lab was a candle floating on top of a potion in a cauldron behind Snape’s desk, which had been burning for days now. Harry knew better than to touch it. He was surprised how empty the room seemed, how dusty, how dead, without Snape to give it a spark

of warmth and life. He shook his head to unsettle the lingering impression and moved towards Snape's desk.

Dobby trailed behind him. "What is Harry Potter looking for?"

"Any handwritten notes with the name of a potion at the top," Harry said, studying the locked drawer at the top of the desk. The locking spell was a simple one, and he wondered why, until he saw the wicked-looking needle that would have pierced his fingers if he'd used his hand to it. He shook his head. Snape really is paranoid. "Or anything that says James Potter."

Dobby nodded, and whisked away to the other side of the room. Harry could hear faint squeaks and pops, and assumed he was using house elf magic to search. He didn't bother to look over. He trusted Dobby completely.

He rifled through a few half-scribbled sheets of parchment that weren't anything like complete Potions recipes, and then paused. The nearest sheet had flickered, as if the words written on it were only a glamour, and a cover for what was really there. Harry flipped back to it and narrowed his eyes.

The Meleager Potion.

Harry lifted the notes out, and whispered, "Aspectus Lyncis," when he realized the words wouldn't stop flickering in front of his eyes. That stripped the glamour from the parchment, and the words calmed and let him read them.

A potion to imitate and reverse the fate of Meleager. We all live as long as candleflames, in truth, compared to the mountains and the rivers.

Harry knew the legend of Meleager, whose life had been tied to a burning brand, and who had died when his mother threw the brand into the fire in grief over Meleager's killing of her brothers, his uncles. He could imagine what a potion tied to that legend would do, though of course Snape was not stupid enough to actually write that out in

the notes. He found his head turning, little by little, to stare at the potion on which the candle-flame floated.

He walked slowly towards it and bent his head, sniffing. When he realized that he could smell chocolate, and that he had a deep desire to taste the potion, he leaned back and closed his eyes, fighting down several emotions.

The potion smelled, and looked, like the one that Fudge had licked off his fingers when Snape and Harry visited the Ministry. Whether Snape had created the Meleager Potion with just Fudge in mind, Harry didn't know. He also didn't know whether Fudge would die for certain when the candle was doused.

He did know that it sounded like it, and all he could feel was a sick wonder at the back of his mind. Would Snape really kill the Minister, in such a way that no one else would probably be able to trace it back to him? Surely, if he was tested for the potion, no one else would recognize it, since it was an entirely new creation. Snape might even have made it out of ingredients that would go inert when their work was complete, a tactic he had told Harry about in their summer potions theory discussions. That would prevent anyone from finding anything suspicious when they examined Fudge's body.

Harry checked the parchment in his hand. Yes, the Meleager Potion included several of those ingredients.

He found his hands shaking, his breath rushing, his heart pounding hard enough in his ears to make his vision blur. Snape could only have wanted to kill the Minister because he was angry at him over Harry's abduction and trying to return custody to James. There was no other reason. So far as Harry knew, before this summer, Snape had completely and utterly ignored the Minister's existence. Perhaps he might have felt some grudge from the days when he was arrested and denounced as a Death Eater, but Harry doubted that. The timing of this revenge would have been too coincidental.

He was going to kill someone. Not in battle, not because I asked him to, but because he wanted to, for what he sees as wrongs done to me.

It was intolerable. There were some things that went too far, particularly when he was out from under the Occlumency shields. Harry might have been able to understand Snape brewing a potion like this for a personal enemy; the man who had that many spells and wards on the door to his potions lab was perfectly capable of coming up with the idea, even if he never used it. But he would have killed someone in Harry's name, in a way that would make Harry indirectly responsible for it.

Harry could not bear it. No matter how much he didn't want to make Snape angry, no matter how much he loved his guardian, there were some things that he couldn't bear.

He opened his eyes and surveyed the Meleager Potion bleakly. Of course, part of the problem was that he didn't know what might happen if he disturbed it. If he put out the candle at all, Fudge might die, or at least burn. Or perhaps Snape intended to blackmail the Minister, and would only snuff the candle if Fudge did not do as he wanted.

Or perhaps the potion was actually primed to do something else, and Harry would set it off if he touched it, because he had an imperfect understanding of how its name was tied to its nature.

He was sure of only one thing: he could not leave the potion in Snape's care, no matter what deception he had to come up with to conceal that he had been the one to take it. He could not bear it if Fudge died after he knew about the potion.

He extended his hand, and his will, and his magic swept forward and delicately levitated the entire cauldron into the air, keeping the floating candle alight. Harry breathed a sigh of relief when no wards screamed at him. He knew that Snape often didn't use wards around his actual cauldrons, for fear of the magic interacting with the potion's ingredients, but if any brew would have been the exception, it was this one.

"Master Harry."

Harry controlled his flinch with a stern command to every muscle in his body, and didn't let the cauldron of Meleager Potion fall. He turned and smiled at Dobby. "Yes, Dobby?"

"Dobby has found a paper with James Potter on it," said Dobby, waving a sheaf of papers, and held it so that Harry could read it.

Harry let out a breath when he saw the name of his father scrawled at the top of the parchment, deep enough to half-tear it, and the list of ingredients below. At least some of them were ones he had suspected must be in the potion, to make his father act like he had. And, though Snape did not say so, the antidote would also be fairly simple to make. This potion was delicate and complicated and designed to evade notice and attention. Its antidote would be brute strength, a potion designed to smash at and tear away and counteract those complex, fine chains of magic.

Of course, there was the problem of brewing the antidote, and of making sure that Snape did not blame him for taking the notes for James's potion and the Meleager Potion.

Harry hesitated for only a few moments before the answer came to him. He smiled slowly.

"Thank you, Dobby," he said. "You've been an immense help. You can go back to Malfoy Manor now, if you like."

Dobby regarded him calmly, and didn't move. "Harry Potter will need help brewing the potion?"

Harry blinked. "Yes, of course, I'd like some. But I didn't know if you would want to stay and aid me."

Dobby reached up, and very gently, tapped him on the side of the head with a long finger. Harry blinked again.

"Harry Potter should ask for help more often," said Dobby, and reached out and gripped his arm. "Where does Harry Potter want to brew the potion?"

Harry's mind fixed on the image of the abandoned classroom where he'd been trying to teach Connor and the others, but he knew that he needed to go back to the Slytherin rooms first, to fetch his cauldron and the ingredients he would need. He told Dobby so, and felt the house elf Apparate him, the odd feeling as though he were being squeezed out of the world and then fitted back in. To his relief, when he looked around his room, the cauldron of Meleager Potion had come with them.

Harry trotted to his trunk and drew out his cauldron, his wand, a pouch of crushed violet petals, a small vial of dragon's blood, a pinch of demiguise hair, and a few other things that would counteract the more volatile ingredients in the potion that Snape had fed James. It really was a marvelous creation, but marvelous creations could be still be undone by the simplest means.

He found himself shaking his head, though, instead of letting Dobby Apparate him and the ingredients again. He made his way to Draco's bed and drew back the curtains, watching as Draco slept.

His sleep seemed to be more restless these days, Harry thought, watching him, but also more satisfied. Draco usually had no expression when he slept. Now he often smiled, and murmured what sounded like the names of potion ingredients as he twitched around in search of a comfortable position. He had his head dug into the pillow now, strands of blond hair scattered in several directions, his breathy mutter not loud enough to make out.

If Snape is going too far, does that mean that Draco also is?

Harry half-closed his eyes. Draco still hadn't told him what the purpose of the potion and his research on Julia Malfoy was, and wouldn't let him read the book, but Harry thought he should know more about it as the time to make it drew on. If Draco was going to use the potion to hurt someone else...

Harry wouldn't let him.

Harry sighed and let the curtain fall shut again. It was so much easier defying his guardian and his best friend when they weren't awake, he thought.

He nodded to Dobby.

"Can you take me and all of this to the second classroom from the top of the stairs on the seventh floor?" he asked.

Dobby bowed, ears flapping, grabbed his hand, and Apparated them all again.

"Harry Potter must wake up."

Harry lifted his head with a start. He truly hadn't meant to fall asleep. In fact, the last thing he could remember was counting down the clockwise turns of the spoon in the cauldron, watching as the potion swelled and brightened towards what should be an off-white color, if the notes on the original potion were correct.

"Did I finish—" Harry asked, lifting his head off the table and whipping at his hair. A few specks of dust drifted out, but the classroom hadn't had enough time to get truly dirty since he was last here.

"Yes, Harry Potter sir," said Dobby, and nodded to something behind him. Harry turned around, and then let his breath out with a small sigh. His own cauldron was full of the off-white potion that should neutralize, one by one, the ingredients playing havoc with James's mind and body right now.

The Meleager Potion cauldron sat in a corner of the classroom, still full of its glittering liquid and floating candle. Harry shook his head at it helplessly. He had no idea what to do with the thing, except keep it safe. Any motion might be the one that would burn Fudge, or kill him, or, knowing Snape, tear all his limbs off.

Harry carefully used a cleaning spell on the vial that had held the dragon's blood, then slid the new off-white potion into it. He hesitated, then, looking at Dobby. He hardly needed help to go to the Owlery

and send the potion to Remus for James, but there was something else he wanted to ask Dobby about.

The house elf gazed back at him, eyes large and solemn and gleaming.

I can't, Harry thought. He's done more than enough already, helping me search Snape's rooms and get here and brew the potion.

"Thank you, Dobby," he whispered. "I don't know what I'd have done without you. I hope that you have a safe journey home." Of course, if anything could stop a house elf from Apparating, he didn't know what it was, but the wish seemed appropriate. He started to turn and walk out of the classroom.

Dobby's hand caught his wrist. Harry turned and looked down.

"Harry Potter can at least ask," said Dobby. "Dobby knows he will not order."

Harry felt himself flush. Are my facial expressions that obvious? Or is it only because I'm with someone I feel I don't have to lie to? "I—Dobby, you're under no obligation at all—"

"Dobby prefers to freely offer his help," said Dobby, with a small stamp of his foot. "And if anything Harry Potter asks can help him along the path to becoming vates, then Dobby will do it."

Well, I should arrange that, too. Harry decided it might not be so bad if he linked what he wanted to ask Dobby to do with a conscious stride towards becoming vates.

"If you would seal this room so that no one can get in and touch the Meleager Potion," he whispered, "I'd be grateful. I'd also like to arrange—a delegation, a meeting, something, with magical creatures who are interested in talking about a vates. I've only broken one web so far. I think it's time that I should break more."

Dobby's smile could have lit suns. He raised one hand, and a soft ball of flames popped into being above them, quickly revealing itself as

Fawkes. Fawkes uttered a chatter that Harry presumed was irritation at being summoned so abruptly, but then loosed a long trill as some signal Harry couldn't make out seemed to pass between phoenix and house elf.

"Fawkes has been waiting for Harry Potter to make up his mind on this," Dobby said. "Fawkes will go at once and tell the creatures of the Forest who will want to know that a vates wishes to meet with them."

Harry felt his face flush again. He had actually intended to ask Fawkes for help with something else, and now—

Fawkes uttered a sound that began as a trill but expanded into a warble in the middle. Dobby chuckled again, and shook his head at Harry. "Fawkes says you is to stop thinking so much, Harry Potter," he said. "Whatever you need, if it is not evil, you may at least ask Fawkes instead of brooding about it."

Harry nodded, took a deep breath, and faced the phoenix. "I want Snape to think that the Meleager Potion is utterly destroyed, even though the Minister isn't going to suffer from it. This is what I'd like you to do. I can't have you do it in reality, because I don't know what would happen to the potion then, but you can persuade Snape that you did it if..."

Fawkes listened to the whole plan with evident approval; Dobby didn't bother translating any of his increasingly enthusiastic chirps, until the last. "Fawkes has been wondering when Harry Potter would wake up to the damage the Potions Master was doing," said Dobby, with a slightly stern look.

Harry bowed his head. Waves of heat and cold were threatening to assault him again as he thought about what Snape might have done with that potion, and how he would be responsible for it. But he had to get through that, and do what was necessary. Merlin knew he would brood over what he had done right and what he had done wrong enough later. He was already coming to think that his latest plan of lying to everyone wasn't working, not if two magical creatures could see in a few glances that he so obviously needed help.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I—I'll do something about him. I don't know what yet, but I will."

Fawkes landed briefly on his shoulder, making Harry stagger under the weight, and pushed his head against his cheek with a croon. Then he rose and spread his wings, vanishing in a ball of flame that Harry knew would take him to Snape's office, and then to the Forbidden Forest.

"Dobby will seal this room," said the house elf, his hand gripping Harry's wrist once more. "Harry Potter need not worry."

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry whispered, and ran for the Owlery. He had only a short time till dawn, he thought, and he wanted to send the potion on its way to Remus and be in his bed before then.

He checked his hair and his robes for flecks of dust and potion ingredients as he ran. It was absolutely essential that no one know what he was doing.

His mind returned to the concerns Fawkes and Dobby had.

At least, not yet.

Snape opened the door to his potions lab, and was greeted with the smell of fire.

His first thought was that the Meleager Potion had somehow tipped over, and the candle had set fire to other things in the office. But when he looked, he found a very familiar phoenix instead, sitting amid a pile of ashes where the cauldron had been and grooming itself casually.

"What is this?"

Snape had never heard his own voice so cold. He could feel a small amount of shock trying to surface; he knew what Fawkes must have done, and he had an inkling as to why. But he shoved the thought away. He had done what was necessary to keep Harry absolutely safe. He would not burst out into rages anymore if he did this, and

Harry's mind had been calm and brisk and efficient for as long as Snape had been existing on the icy level of his mind. He knew he was doing the right thing.

Fawkes raised his head and began to sing.

Snape's mother had told him no defense that could allow him to hold the ice against a phoenix's song. He found himself sitting on the floor with no notion of how he got there, his arms crossed over his head as though mere flesh could stand up to music that would conquer and destroy utter evil. The song washed over him, and dragged his emotions, the ones he'd been unwilling to acknowledge since he went cold—that is, everything except the icy rage—into the light.

He saw, as if in a dream, Fawkes flicking into being over the cauldron that held the Meleager Potion, alighting on it, and destroying it with flames of red and gold and blue. The phoenix, of course, being a creature of pure Light and fire, could absorb the candle flame without putting it out, and thus without hurting the person who had already ingested it. Then the phoenix had moved to his desk, and Snape's notes on that potion and the one for Potter, too, were burned and gone.

The potion was evil. What Snape had intended was evil, stepping beyond the bounds of guarding a child whom he wanted to protect. Fawkes, an independent creature of Light who had left his former master when that master grew too Dark for him, would not stand for it.

The whole vision remained hazy and surreal, as though it hadn't really happened, or as though Snape weren't understanding the full import of what the bird wanted to convey to him. But there could be no doubt of Fawkes's disapproval, which overflowed from every stern, loving note.

Snape found himself caught in the storm of emotions he was unprepared to deal with. He tried to fight them back, but so long as the phoenix was singing, he could not. He knelt there, panting, and at least refusing to weep.

A heavy, warm weight on his shoulder nearly unbalanced him. He dropped his arms and looked into the phoenix's dark eyes.

Fawkes pecked him, a swift, scorching motion that left a tiny bit of burned flesh on his cheek. Then he spread his wings, lifted into the air, and flicked out of existence in a ball of flames.

Snape knelt there, and closed his eyes, and breathed hard in the silence that seemed wrenching after all that music.

He felt sorrow swirl through him, and regret, and the panic that had been so familiar after the Death Eater attacks during the summer. He felt as he had when Harry had nearly died from the Blood-Boiling Curse, and he cursed, soft and low and steady, under his breath, as he might have then.

His carefully built refuge was destroyed. He did not know if he could go back to being cold.

But he knew he would have to try, because there was no other way to move forward now. The Meleager Potion was gone, but the danger from the Minister to Harry remained. He had to find some way to fight that, or leave himself helpless.

And Snape hated feeling helpless.

He climbed to his feet and went to fetch a bit of Floo powder and firecall the Headmaster. He would tell Dumbledore that he was not feeling well today, and would not teach his classes. It was only the second time he had ever asked for such an indulgence. He was sure Albus would grant it to him after seeing his face.

One day. That is all you have. You must become what you were again, or you fail Harry and you fail yourself.

If only the damn, dim remnant of the phoenix song would stop echoing in the room, and the sensation that he was making a mistake would stop echoing in his brain.

Chapter Nineteen: Delegation

“Attention, students. Can I have your attention, if you please?”

Harry lifted his head, reluctantly, from the history book he'd been discussing with Draco. Draco had been insisting that one particular unspecified incident of a witch showing up to rescue a bunch of captured pureblood children from Muggles who wanted to burn them sounded a lot like Julia Malfoy. Harry had been trying to point out that Julia Malfoy would have been about twelve years old at the time, but he didn't think he was having a lot of success. That might have been because he kept breaking off the discussion to eat his dinner, while Draco prattled on, but he thought it had more to do with his friend's innate stubbornness.

Dumbledore stood behind the high table, smiling, one hand extended as if he were going to hex everyone in sight. Harry found himself tensing up, involuntarily. He shook his head at himself and sat back, arms folded over his chest. He's not going to hex everyone. You don't cast just dueling spells with your hand held like that. Calm down, Harry. Snape's training is rubbing off on you in all the wrong ways.

“I know that many of you have been wondering why Quidditch has been canceled this year,” said Dumbledore, chuckling as shouts came back to him from the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables. “It was canceled to give Hogwarts the opportunity to concentrate its attention on another event instead. How many people here have ever heard of the Triwizard Tournament?”

Harry frowned. He vaguely remembered reading a reference to it, once, but he didn't think—

A flow of chatter from around him told him that many other people had heard of it. Harry resolved to pay more attention in the future. There was always something he didn't know about, and any part of it could hurt Connor or someone else he cared for.

“The Triwizard Tournament,” Dumbledore went on grandly, apparently open to explaining for those who didn't know, “is a great contest held between three of the European wizarding schools—

Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. Three champions, one from each school, compete with each other for a prize and honor and glory for their school. Once it was held much more often than is the case now, not only for the sake of the champions and the students, but to strengthen the bonds in the wizarding community. However, the tasks proved too dangerous, often killing the champions, and the tradition was discontinued.” Dumbledore paused, and Harry could almost see his eyes glowing from where he sat. “But now the tradition has been revived! Students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons will journey to Hogwarts on Halloween, and a few days after that, the champions will be chosen!”

A murmur of excitement began to run round the Great Hall. From the Gryffindor table, someone bold enough to draw the Headmaster’s attention shouted out, “How will the champions be chosen, Headmaster?”

“By means of the Goblet of Fire,” said Dumbledore, with calm cheer. “This will select among the names of many potential champions from each school in order to narrow down the most worthy students to compete. The students will need to be clever, of course, good wizards, and honorable. The Goblet will doubtless decide on the basis of other qualities as well.”

Harry shook his head as he listened to the murmurs. Everyone around him seemed simultaneously convinced that he or she might be a champion and convinced that the Goblet might not pick him or her.

“Who cares?” he mouthed to Draco, who’d only just looked up from his book. “It’s just some stupid competition anyway. And who would really want to face basilisks or whatever else they have to face?”

“It probably won’t be a basilisk,” said Draco, and wrinkled his nose at him as if Harry should have known that. “Now, what do you think of this one? ‘A lovely silver-haired woman was sometimes seen walking the hills of Wiltshire in early spring, her eyes closed as if she were dreaming.’”

“Lots of Malfoys must have been silver-haired...”

Harry let himself be drawn into the argument. It was easier than trying to figure out why Dumbledore was watching him with shining eyes from the head table.

“Master Harry! Wake up, Master Harry!”

Harry blinked the haze from his eyes and fumbled for his glasses. When he drew open the curtains of his bed, Dobby was waiting for him, leaping from foot to foot. Fawkes hovered above his head. Harry glanced around swiftly, but other than a grumble from Blaise, there was no sign that the house elf and the phoenix had awakened any of the other boys. Harry felt a rush of relief.

“What is it, Dobby?” he whispered.

“Fawkes has done as he said he would,” Dobby whispered back insistently. “Harry Potter is to come to the Forbidden Forest and meet with the magical creatures who want to meet the vates.”

Harry took a deep breath, and felt his heart speed up until he could literally feel it shaking his chest. But he didn’t think of refusing. How could he have, when Dobby and Fawkes had helped him so much the other night?

“I’m coming,” he said, and then glanced down at his pyjamas. “Do they want, um, some more formal attire than this?”

Fawkes gave an impatient trill, and Dobby translated without waiting for Harry to ask. “Many of the magical creatures in the Forest go naked all the time, Master Harry. Master Harry is to come on.”

Harry shrugged. He supposed he should enjoy the chance to attend a meeting in pyjamas while he had it. It wasn’t as though most of his wizard allies would have accepted such a thing.

He grabbed his wand, made sure his glasses were settled firmly on his face, and let Dobby take his hand. This time, the experience of house elf Apparition wasn’t so strange, and he could even stand on his own feet, take a deep breath, and look around when he was

finished. They were, once again, in that clearing in the Forbidden Forest where the centaurs had tried Draco his first year. There was the familiar hill, the rocks that had formed an impromptu gallows standing on top of it.

This time, though, he was in the exact center of the clearing, with Dobby still holding the wrist. Fawkes puffed into being above him, and let him see that many magical creatures waited around the edges of the place, studying him. Harry lifted his chin and let his eyes meet their gazes, one by one. It was much easier than looking down or shuffling, much easier than he'd had any right to expect, he thought. At least he knew this kind of dancing, or path-walking, the way that Dobby and Fawkes had once referred to it, was difficult. It was not full of human complexities that would turn on him, the way it seemed his relationships with his guardian and best friend had lately.

A contingent of centaurs stood directly in front of him, on the level ground, their arms folded across their chests. They began stamping their left front hooves when they saw him, a sound as low and regular as a heartbeat, but considerably more unnerving. Harry nodded to the two of them he recognized, Firenze and Coran, who had tried Draco in that strange way, and then turned to his left, glancing at the hill.

It was alive with small, lithe bodies. Fawkes's flames gave him glimpses of gold and green and other brilliant colors. The Many were there, then, and multiple-headed snakes that Harry was sure were Runespoors. Some of them had three heads, some only two. Two of the heads would often combine and bite off a third, if Harry remembered his studies correctly. He found himself relieved that he would be able to speak with at least some of the attendees without needing Dobby to translate.

He continued turning, until he could face the edge of the clearing that had been directly behind him when he arrived. He felt his breath catch, tears forming in his eyes.

Unicorns stood behind him, shining silvery in the darkness, their heavy snowfall-like manes and their gleaming horns so beautiful that Harry had to suppress the urge to go nearer and touch them. He settled for inclining his head. He had never seen so many unicorns all

together in one place, nor expected to see them. He forbade himself to actually shed the tears he wanted to. This was a formal meeting, and he was a wizard, even if was a vates—in truth, a representative not of these creatures, but of the species that had bound the others. He did not have the right to ask them to indulge any weakness he might have.

He turned back to face the centaurs. As if that had been a signal, their hooves stopped drumming, and Firenze stepped forth from among the others, his face calm.

“Harry Potter,” he said. “We have met once before. We came tonight because you have proven your worth to us in formal testing. And because your fate is linked to Mars, and he grows steadily in the skies.”

Harry couldn’t help stiffening a bit. It was an odd first statement from the centaurs, when he had expected them to speak about the webs that bound them.

“There is a prophecy, that is true,” he said. “But the prophecy is not clear about the way in which I am implicated in the war.”

“The stars are always clear, shining beyond cloud and storm.” Firenze looked unmoved. “They are the only statement we need. You are in the war, but you are also our vates. We would not see you die before you have fulfilled your service to our kind.”

Harry frowned, but nodded slightly. I can hardly blame them for that. “There is a problem with haste,” he warned them. “I don’t know the webs very well yet. If I unbind them too fast, then I might do you as much harm as good.”

Firenze’s face was calm and blank. “We do not understand you, Harry Potter.”

Harry rubbed his forehead. His scar seemed to tingle and burn, though that was probably only because he’d been dreaming about Voldemort before he woke up. “I thought you meant that you wanted

me to unbind you now, or at any rate as soon as possible, before I die in this war.”

“A vates cannot be hurried,” said Firenze, with something like shock in his tone. At least, Harry thought it might have been shock if the centaurs in general weren’t so subdued. “He must always be becoming. You must walk the path between the thorns and make your decisions in the right place, without anyone hurrying or urging you on. We agreed to come to this meeting to let you know that we know of the war, of Mars’s shining. Though not everyone has agreed—” his gaze went past the centaurs behind him and further into the Forest, as if to indicate people who were not there “—we believe that we must help you survive, so that you can continue this process of becoming.”

Harry shuddered a bit. “What kind of help were you thinking of giving?” No need to panic, yet, no need to panic.

Firenze’s gaze came back to him, calm and nearly blank again. “You have heard of what centaurs can do in the past.”

“I thought those were only legends,” Harry whispered. Certainly the last story of centaurs actually helping wizards, rather than simply trying to live apart from them, was a thousand years old. Then a small group of twenty centaurs, joined to a smaller group of wizards, had devastated a group of wizards four times their size. In battle, they were ferocious.

“They are not,” said Firenze. “We have not gone to war in a long time, Harry Potter. We are prepared to change that, for your sake and for our own. We are allowed to harm wizards if we are fighting in defense of one of them. A hole in the net.” He might have sounded ironic—at least, he should have if he were human—but instead, he went on regarding Harry as if he hadn’t said anything at all sickening or horrifying. “We offer you our aid in battle, in return for our freedom.”

“You don’t need to do that,” said Harry, thinking of all the ways in which he was not a general. He didn’t know the first thing about pure battle tactics or strategy. His mother had always trained him to fight alone. His first goal had always been defensive, to protect Connor.

Even with the Dark Arts spells Snape was teaching him, Harry had no idea how to arrange soldiers, how to best an army on a battlefield. The thought of doing so made him sick to his stomach. What if he put someone in the wrong place and they died because of him? "It is my kind's fault that you are bound. I am prepared to free you, as soon as I study the web and know all the consequences of doing so."

"Nevertheless," said Firenze, "we have decided it is to our advantage to do this, and so it will be done."

Harry hesitated, wondering if he could ask the centaurs to fight under someone else, and then shook his head. The only person he knew for certain could arrange soldiers and, in so doing, win battles, was Dumbledore, and he would not trust the Headmaster not to put the centaurs back under their web again. "I am no strategist, no tactician," he said, deciding that he might as well reveal why he was so reluctant. "I might lose you the war and your freedom and your lives, all three, if you put your fates in my hands."

"We will teach you," said Firenze, his voice implacable. "We ask only for a commitment from you, vates, and that you may give us by answering five questions for us."

Harry swallowed. "Very well."

"Why do you want to become vates?" Firenze might have been Professor Vector, questioning Harry on his Arithmancy problems. Harry found it easier to answer when he thought of this that way, as a test in abstract knowledge, rather than something that might determine the future course of his and other people's lives.

"To spread freedom," said Harry. "And out of some guilt, because I did not know about the webs and was horrified when I did learn about them. And because I lived under a web myself, and I would like to prevent that from happening to anyone else." He knew the answers were all honest.

"When do you believe your work as vates will end?"

Harry blinked and hesitated, caught off-guard. "I do not know if it ever will," he said at last. "I do not know how many webs there are to undo, how many compulsions to break, or at least try to break. Perhaps I might spend years negotiating just to make sure that house elf webs can be removed, for example. I expect that will be my hardest task." Then he thought of the northern goblins, with their webs bound to linchpins, and shivered. Perhaps not. "It might take me until the end of my life, or it might last longer than I am able to live. Or perhaps I will die in the war and it will never end, then. I simply cannot know."

Firenze nodded, with no sign on his face of whether that answer had been right or wrong. "What do you believe would happen to the magical creatures if Voldemort returned to power?"

Harry shook his head. "I think he would enslave some of you, the way he does humans, and perhaps set free those ones who could help him. Others he would probably kill." He could not prevent himself from looking at the unicorns over his shoulder. "Or at least only keep them alive for what they could be useful for."

The unicorns watched him. An incredibly intense vision came to Harry, of a night-covered farm where unicorns huddled in pens, milked for their blood and deprived of their horns. He gagged, and felt a shiver in his belly that made him come perilously near to losing his dinner. He swallowed, and managed to fix his gaze on Firenze again.

"What do you believe will happen if this war ends and the Light side remains in power, untroubled?"

"The continuation of the webs," said Harry. "Dumbledore is committed to keeping things the way they are, with no major changes. He could not be vates, and I doubt he would become one at this point in his life, or want to. He told me that he would have to sacrifice his magic to become vates. I don't think he wants to do that."

Firenze showed no reaction on his face, but did say, "If you sacrifice your magic, you cannot be vates. Only a vates has the strength to break the webs."

I wonder if Dumbledore knows that. Harry shoved the thought away, because it made him uneasy. He knew that Dumbledore was worried about him and his power, but he did not like to think that that extended to actively working against him. They had a truce, after all, and doing this would violate it. "I understand," he said.

"And the fifth and last question, Harry Potter." Firenze's voice became deep and rumbling. Behind him, the centaurs began stamping their hooves again, the drum-like sound mingling well with the tones of his voice. "If it came down to a decision between saving a portion of your own people and freeing a species of magical creature, which would you choose?"

"Which wizards are we talking about, and which species of magical creature?" Harry demanded.

The drumming ended with a full-on, mighty crash as all the centaurs reared and brought both front hooves down together. Harry started, and wondered if that meant he had answered the question incorrectly and the centaurs were about to charge and destroy him.

"We renew our commitment," said Firenze, his face perfectly serene. "We will follow Harry Potter into war, when he fights his battles. We know that he will be vates, or become one from moment to moment." He turned and cantered back to his herd, not looking back at Harry once, though he did say, "Welcome to our hearts, child of Mars, as no wizard has been welcome in centuries."

Harry just shook his head and waited. That seemed to be the end of the ritual with the centaurs, however, so he turned and looked in the direction of the Many and the Runespoors writhing on their hill.

"Greetings," he said, holding a snake in his sight, so that he knew he was speaking Parseltongue. "What can I do for my legless siblings?"

The mingled hissing of the Many came back to him, flowing and ebbing, restless as a tide. "There are many bindings here. We do not like it. The Forest provides a home, but were we to venture outside it, we could not bite wizards for hurting us. We are choking on the taste of webs. Set us free."

“Do you wish to return to your home?” Harry asked, thinking of possible ways that he might convince—well, someone—to help him send a shipment of deadly South African hive cobras overseas. “I could make arrangements for that. You could live in a world without bindings again.”

“We wish to stay in the Forest,” the hissing returned. “We have made a nest, and our eggs shall hatch soon. But we will have it on our own terms. Our children must be able to learn self-defense, and to extend their tongues and scent no bindings.”

“It might take a while before that can happen,” said Harry, and relaxed his sight the way he had when first traveling with Fawkes, so that he could see the webs arching everywhere. There was a new, fierce orange glow in front of him, which Harry guessed was the web that had taken over the Many. He wondered who had spun it, then shook his head. It’s probably an old spell left by the Headmasters of Hogwarts, to make sure that no dangerous creature can simply move into the Forest and then venture forth and attack the students at any time. “I do not know how long it will take me to remove all these webs.”

“We want them gone.”

“And I said it may take time,” said Harry. He didn’t think the Many were stupid, just immensely stubborn.

“We accept that. But we will have your commitment. And we will send a pair of eyes with you, so that we may have reassurance that you are acting on your commitment even when you are away from the Forest.”

Harry saw a small, lithe movement low to the ground, and then one of the tiny cobras was coiling around his ankle, sliding up his leg. He extended an arm, and it slithered up his chest and then down to his wrist, coiling there. It was small enough that, when it had wrapped itself around twice, it felt no thicker than a bracelet.

“What do I call you?” Harry asked the snake, making a mental note to keep it out of sight. Snape had been acting more strangely than ever in the past few days, sometimes cold, sometimes snapping at him with familiar rage. Merlin knew what he might do if he saw the snake.

“This is one part of us,” said the mingled hiss. “You will call the one part the Many. Through this little one, all of us are with you, all of us are watching, and all of us, if need be, can come to your aid.”

Harry stifled his snort at the thought of what would happen if all the Many came flowing out of the Forbidden Forest at once. It probably meant there was something wrong with him that his first reaction to the thought was amusement, rather than alarm. “If you wish,” he said. “But I thought you had said that you could not defend yourselves even if you venture out of the Forest.”

“If we are doing it to defend a wizard, we can.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was starting to wonder which Headmaster had set the webs to do this, and to hate him or her. “Very well,” he said, and then glanced at the Runespoors. He had only ever spoken to them, briefly, during the wild full moon night last year when he’d run through the Forest with Sirius and Remus. He did not know what they would want of him, other than the ending of their web.

A three-headed Runespoor slid away from the others and raised its necks to look at him. Harry returned the gaze as steadily as he could, though he had to blink and the snake did not.

“Snake-Speaker,” said the Runespoor at last, as if something in the look they exchanged had satisfied her and not hearing him speak Parseltongue. “We are not like the centaurs, nor the Many. We will not make bargains for either offensive or defensive protection of you.”

Harry nodded, rather relieved. “Then is there anything you would like, beyond the breaking of your web?”

“Do you hear the singing?”

Harry frowned and listened for a moment. He could hear nothing more than the wind in the trees and the shuffling and shifting of the unicorns behind him. "No. What is the music I am supposed to hear?"

"When you can hear the music, then come to us. We will make sure that you learn to listen."

The Runespoor turned and slithered rapidly back in the direction of the hill. The other snakes followed her, and dissipated. Harry blinked. And they say centaurs have a reputation for being enigmatic.

He waited a moment more, but the Runespoors did not return, and so he faced the unicorns. He was not sure how he was supposed to speak to them, until one of them let out a neigh that drifted like snow, and Fawkes trilled, and Dobby translated the trill.

"They would like Harry Potter to break their web this year," he said, his eyes very large, "in return for the debt he owes them."

Harry shook his head. "I don't understand."

Trill, neigh, trill, and Dobby was translating again. "Some time ago, you had the chance to save a unicorn and did not take it," he said. "They sensed your presence when they came to mourn their dead. They did not know who you were then. Now they do, and they want to know why the vates would hurt them so severely."

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew what Dobby referred to now. He knew that Quirrell had been feeding on unicorns' blood in his first year, but revealing himself would likely have meant his death. So he had watched Quirrell kill the unicorn, doing nothing to stop it.

"Killing a unicorn is a sin," Dobby whispered. "And watching one be killed is not something the unicorns like."

Harry heard the soft, bell-like clomp of hooves, and opened his eyes to see one of the unicorns coming forward. It stopped in front of him, so brilliant that Harry could barely stand to watch the shine of its coat, and then bowed its head. Its horn rested a few inches from his heart.

Harry could imagine what would happen if the unicorn moved forward, putting all the power of its head behind the blow, and speared him.

He could not pretend that he would not deserve it.

The unicorn stepped back and reared. Harry's eyes helplessly followed the falling-star streak of light that was its horn, and then the golden motion of hooves as it turned and sped into the Forest.

And then the others followed after it, in a blazing rush, like the Milky Way come down and dancing in the Forest. Harry put a hand to his face to hold and wipe away the tears, and felt the tickle of a tongue as the Many on his wrist put out its tongue to taste the salt.

"We could have bitten it, and defended you," said the snake.

"I didn't want you to," Harry whispered, and glanced at Fawkes and Dobby. "What was that about? What did they decide?"

Fawkes trilled, a low and musical sound. Dobby translated. "Unicorns are innocent, Harry Potter. They know the touch, the scent, of the innocent. That close, they could sense that you did not mean to let their fellow die, that you would have given your life in his defense if you could. You are forgiven."

Harry closed his eyes. "You told me once that the unicorns were bound because they were too beautiful," he said.

"Yes, Harry Potter." Harry heard the slight impact of skin on skin as Dobby nodded his head, his ears flopping.

"What are they like?" Harry whispered. "Or what are they going to be like, when they're free, if they're that beautiful with the web in place?"

"Dobby does not know," said the house elf, and his voice was subdued.

Harry took a deep breath and opened his eyes. His tears were gone, and that was all to the good. "I need to break their web," he said. "But

I need to break a web on a smaller scale first, to practice, and in a way I know won't be against its owner's will." He looked at Dobby, and Dobby's eyes stared back at him.

"Dobby," Harry whispered, "how would you like to be free? I can at least ask."

Dobby's eyes widened until they seemed to occupy the whole of his face, and then he gave a tiny, halting nod.

Harry nodded back. Oh, Lucius is going to make me pay for this, but I will not trample on anyone's will. I cannot. I am going to write a letter to him, and ask him to let Dobby go. Then I will do what I can. I shall doubtless have to study a bit before I can break his web, especially because he said once that his were half-frayed and not like other house elves' webs, and there will be differences between his web and the unicorns'.

But he did not feel intimidation at the thought of asking, or even what Lucius would doubtless ask in return. He felt radiant contentment, which seemed to spill out of him until he shone in the dark like a unicorn.

I want to do this. I don't know if there's something I've ever wanted so much.

I want to know what a unicorn looks like without its web.
"Harry!"

Harry looked up anxiously, blinking, as Connor ran towards him in the Great Hall at breakfast that morning. This was the morning he expected the arrival of Lucius's letter, since he'd sent his request off a few days ago, and anything else unusual happening made him jump.

It didn't help, of course, that Draco made an annoyed sound, resenting the presence of Harry's brother, and that the Many, who lurked under Harry's sleeve and invisibly ate part of his breakfast, took the opportunity to make softly hissed comments about that. The Many had decided that they did not like Draco. Harry was actually

glad for the web, now, that did not permit the Many to simply bite anyone they wanted out of the Forbidden Forest.

“What is it, Connor?” Harry asked, standing and moving a few feet away from the table so that he didn’t disturb Draco.

“A letter from Dad.” Connor shook his head. Harry didn’t understand the expression on his face. He was smiling with his mouth, but his eyes were worried. “I think you should read it.”

Harry took it, cautiously. He decided that the potion might have worked, from the simple fact that the lines didn’t stagger all over the page, but he didn’t know what he expected to find.

Whatever it was, it was not what James had written, since Harry felt cold shock pass into him, pressing tendon to bone.

Dear Connor:

I wanted you to know that I am well again. Harry brewed an antidote to the potion Snape gave me, and I am in my right mind. Remus has told me about the—things I did while under the potion. I am horribly embarrassed, but I will not waste time dwelling on them. If Harry is blaming himself for not stopping Snape, tell him not to. I wholeheartedly believe that he had no idea what his guardian meant to do.

It has, however, increased my determination to get Harry away from him. There are other ways than simply approaching the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, ways that I should have tried in the first place, given what I know about Snivellus. I am going to try them. What are they? You’ll know soon enough, since I intend to make them very, very public.

Please do not show this letter to Harry. It would only make him unhappy. I don’t want to make him unhappier than he would already be. But this must be done. The man who would do this has no right to be near and in control of my son.

Your loving father,

James.

Harry looked up from the letter to Connor. "But he said for you not to show it to me."

Connor flushed, then scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah, well," he muttered to his trainers. "I still thought you should see it. It concerns you." He jerked his head back up and stared at Harry defiantly, as though he thought his brother would slap him for being concerned about him.

Harry smiled at him and shook his head. "Thank you," he said softly, and handed the letter back to Connor. The shock in him was rapidly approaching panic, but he didn't want his brother to think he'd made a mistake in showing him the letter. He hugged Connor, tightly, and felt the embrace returned. The Many made an angry comment about being jostled that Harry ignored. "It's good to know that I've got at least one person I can depend on."

Connor hugged him one moment past when Harry would have let him go, then turned and jogged back to the Gryffindor table. Above him, as if he had been waiting until Connor was gone so that he wouldn't have to deliver the letter in the presence of a Gryffindor, Harry saw Julius stooping down.

He held out his arm for the great horned owl, and resolutely didn't stagger when Julius landed and clamped down hard enough to draw blood. He actually held the letter in one talon, presenting it to Harry. Harry fumbled it open with the hand not occupied with being pressed against the owl's tail feathers.

The message was short.

Potter:

You ask two favors of me, one more than the truce-dance allows. I, therefore, demand two favors in return, one of them in the dance and one outside it. I demand that I be allowed to specify the Midwinter gift I receive, and I insist that you come to a small gathering of Dark

wizards and witches that I intend to hold in Hogwarts's Room of Requirement on Halloween night.

You have my permission to free my house elf.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry smiled in spite of himself. Lucius was being a bastard, treading the edge of courtesy, but Harry's asking for the favor of freeing Dobby had done the same thing. This was the first step to being a true vates. Harry could feel the thorns of the path yielding to roses for the first time.

"What are you doing?"

Harry found himself nearly jerked off-balance as Draco seized his shoulder. Julius gave a dangerous hiss and took to the air again, circling once over Draco. Harry thought for a moment that he would drop a pellet, but either he remembered that this was his master's son or he decided it was beneath the dignity of a truce-owl. He turned and flew out the window of the Great Hall instead, his every feather a-ruffle.

Harry pulled and twisted lightly, and freed himself of Draco's hold. "What do you mean?" he asked his best friend, who was flushed and had that odd look in his eyes again.

"You—I just don't like you touching other people the way you did Connor, that's all," said Draco.

Harry narrowed his eyes and, on instinct, did something he'd never tried, forcing and focusing his sight on a wizard the way he would on a magical creature.

He nearly gagged when he saw a faint silvery-black web crawling over Draco's face and arms and head. It was delicate, and Harry could not comprehend who had put it there, but he thought he knew what it was for. It had caused Draco's strange behavior of late, behavior that focused around Harry.

Could he have borne this web even last year, when he convinced me that he loved me?

There was a disturbing thought, but Harry pushed it away. He didn't have the right to worry about it. What mattered was freeing Draco of that web, and doing it as soon as possible.

"He's my brother," he just said, more mildly than Draco expected, from the blink of his eyes. "Now, come on, I thought you were going to tell me what interested you the most about Julia's actions in Scotland."

Draco let himself be distracted, chattering happily about how he thought Julia must have come to Hogwarts after she was a student and done something—strong—in regards to the school. Harry sat down with him again, his eyes narrowed. He seemed to be seeing the web around Draco all the time now, even when he didn't want to.

"Why do you care?" the Many asked him, the words barely more than darts of the little snake's tongue against his skin. "He is only one web among many. What makes him so important?"

Harry just shook his head. Draco needs and deserves his freedom as much as anyone else would. But it's going to be a delicate balance. If that web focuses around me, then my spending time with him the way he wants is just going to sink its hold deeper. I'll have to try to give him his own life as much as possible.

He found himself almost glad, in a fierce way, of the discovery. Not only would it mean freeing Draco sooner, but it kept him from wondering what his father was planning.

PLEASE READ: This was supposed to be Chapter 25. However, Chapter 25 refuses to show up for some reason, so I'm reposting this as Chapter 26. If and when the problem solves itself, I'll straighten out any duplicate copies.

Chapter Twenty: Cry Havoc

Harry was at breakfast when the doors of the Great Hall opened. He craned his neck to see who would be coming in, blinking. Had the other schools already arrived for the Triwizard Tournament? Considering the way that everyone else seemed so interested in it, Harry would have thought he would hear about that further in advance.

Draco poked him with one finger. "Harry. I was trying to tell you more about why I think Julia Malfoy was a Dark Lady."

"And I was saying that she couldn't have been, unless she actually declared herself to the Dark and a Lady at some point or another," Harry snapped back, growing even more curious as he saw two robed figures, both witches, walking through the doors. "Just because she has a certain kind of power and a certain kind of disposition doesn't mean she actually did what you think she did."

"Why wouldn't she declare herself a Lady?" Draco sounded huffy. He didn't appear to take any notice of the two women as they walked rapidly towards the head table, but then, Harry thought, he wouldn't. He was becoming more and more convinced that Draco's web had something to do with this potion, though Merlin alone knew how; Draco still wouldn't let Harry look at the book that he claimed to have got the potion recipe from.

"I don't know, Draco," Harry said, and then blinked as the two witches came close enough for recognition. One looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place her until he glanced at the other. Though she had lank, mouse-brown hair now, she still wore much the same face as she had to visit him at Lux Aeterna. Nymphadora Tonks. What's she doing here?

“What’s my cousin doing here?” Draco asked then, apparently noticing her for the first time.

Harry shook his head and stood up, trying to decide what to do. The second woman was Auror Mallory, the pretty but stern witch he had met in the Ministry just after he walked away from Fudge. He hesitated when he stood, though, not knowing what would be the best course.

The two Aurors halted in front of the head table. In a clear, ringing voice, Auror Mallory pronounced, “Headmaster Dumbledore, if we might have a moment of your time?”

“A moment and more than that, dear ladies,” said Dumbledore, inclining his head. Harry could see the wariness on his face, though, however well he tried to hide it; he had often worn such an expression around Harry. He didn’t know what was going on, either. In one way, Harry supposed, that was good. It meant this couldn’t be a plot of Dumbledore’s. On the other hand, Harry had to watch in uncertainty of what came next, and he hated uncertainty and sudden change.

“Thank you.” Auror Mallory bowed to him, and seemed to nudge Tonks with an elbow on the way down, so that the younger woman started and bowed a few moments behind her. Then she drew a scroll from her sleeve. “My pardons for doing this so publicly,” she added, to whom Harry didn’t know, “but Madam Bones felt it was best, given what we’ve learned about this man in the past few hours.”

Harry felt his heart lurch, and then speed to such an extent that he swayed on his feet. Draco took his hand, saying something that Harry couldn’t hear over his heartbeat. Millicent was grabbing his shoulders, as she had after Regulus was suddenly torn from his head, urging him to sit back down.

For some reason, although he couldn’t hear their soothing words, he could hear the Auror perfectly when she began to read.

“We have come, under sanction of Madam Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, to arrest Professor

Severus Snape on charges of administering an insanity potion to James Potter—"Mallory had to lift her voice slightly when the chatter of excited students began to rise from the tables"—and a potion with unknown side effects to Minister Fudge. He did not register the creation of these potions with the Ministry, and in at least one case he did not send the antidote on his own. Both James Potter and Minister Fudge have filed charges." The Auror closed the scroll with a shake of her arm and turned to face Snape.

Harry was glad he hadn't eaten much, or he would have been tempted to vomit it all back up. He understood at once what was happening, but it had still taken him by surprise, and he was gasping and choking and trying not to become overwhelmed by it.

James knows by now that trying to take me from Snape doesn't work. So he's taking Snape from me.

Snape stood up, his face pale but composed. "I will protest these charges," he said. "James Potter is a known rival of mine from our days here at Hogwarts. He would say anything that he thought might discredit me. And the Minister recently abducted my ward. It is not surprising that they would file these charges."

"We have enough evidence to arrest you, sir," said Mallory crisply. "There were eyewitnesses to Potter's condition, in the form of himself, Remus Lupin, and Madam Hellebore Shiverwood. The Minister and Augustus Starrise stand ready to testify that you fed the Minister an unusual potion the day that you visited him, on the autumnal equinox. And we have evidence of what the insanity potion was meant to do in writing, from your ward, Harry Potter." She turned and glanced calmly over at the Slytherin table.

Harry felt his sickness increase. He had written a note to Remus along with the antidote, explaining its uses and why he believed it would counteract the insanity potion that James had taken. And he had included a line about brewing the antidote because he believed that Snape would never brew one.

The look of betrayal on Snape's face was terrible. Harry flinched and tried not to run from the Great Hall. There were still things he had to

do. His guardian might hate him at the moment, but that didn't mean Harry could give up on trying to save him.

"Sit down before you fall down," Millicent hissed in his ear, and pressed firmly at his shoulders.

"No, damn you," Harry snarled at her, making her fall back in startlement, and tore his hand from Draco's tightening hold. He slipped around the Slytherin table and set off towards the Aurors, his heart beating fast. Perhaps he was a coward, but he kept his eyes on the women instead of on Snape.

He did feel a hand brush his shoulder, briefly, as he worked his way past the Hufflepuff table, and glanced back to see Justin frowning worriedly at him. Zacharias's face was as expressionless as it was most of the time, but he lifted his eyebrows when he saw Harry looking towards him and mouthed, "Good luck."

Harry turned his head and, as if by fate, met his brother's eyes. Connor looked stricken, but nodded firmly. Harry relaxed a bit. At least Connor wasn't torn, thinking that he should support James in this—this crazily stupid idea.

This entirely legal idea. Snape really did do everything that they said he did.

That was what made Harry sweat when he finally halted in front of the two Aurors and bowed to them. Tonks had watched him come, her face growing more and more unhappy. Auror Mallory was watching Snape as if waiting for him to draw his wand and come after her, her posture tight and ready. Harry didn't look forward to what would happen if Snape tried it. From the power he could feel buzzing under Auror Mallory's skin, she wasn't much weaker than Snape, and she had had training that might make the difference. If she forced Snape to resort to Dark Arts in order to defeat her, that would only give them another reason to arrest him.

"Aurors," he said.

Mallory glanced at him, and blinked. "Potter," she said. "Is something the matter?"

"I would just like to say that I do believe what my Professor says," said Harry. "My father's been trying to get at him for—a while." He could show them the copies of the taunting letters James had sent, if it would help. If it will keep Snape's magic from being drained, or whatever they really are doing in place of sending prisoners to Azkaban. "And the Minister doesn't like or trust him. I can provide you with evidence of all of that."

"You would turn against your own written evidence?" Mallory asked, her face skeptical.

"I did not realize what it was going to become evidence of, or I would never have written what I did," Harry said.

He knew he had said something wrong when he saw the abrupt way the Auror's face tightened. She shook her head. "Your loyalty is commendable, Mr. Potter, but misplaced in this instance. He did do the things that he's accused of. The motivations behind the accusations may not be pure—Merlin knows that I've seen this enough in my own line of work—but that does not excuse his crimes, which I hardly think were committed out of any pure motivations, either." She shot her eyes back to Snape, who had shifted as if he were about to draw his wand out of his sleeve. Her voice dropped to a growl. "The best thing you can advise him to do right now is come along quietly."

"And how are you going to punish him?" Harry tried, he really did, but he couldn't keep the tightness out of his voice.

Mallory blinked. "Why—not at all, until after he's had a trial and the Wizengamot has declared him guilty," she said. "In a case like this, we can't have anything less than the full Wizengamot try him." Her face softened. "I can promise you, Mr. Potter, we intend to abide by the rules of law. All of them. No punishment and no beating before the trial, no matter what you may have heard. Things were like that in the First War, I'll grant you, but Auror Scrimgeour weeded all that out. It'd be my job to try to do something to hurt a prisoner before his trial,

no matter what he'd done to me or if I really believed him to be guilty or not."

"But what about the Minister's Hounds?" Harry demanded. "Can you guarantee that they won't try to reach and silence him?"

"I will swear you a wizard's oath that they will not." Mallory looked thoughtfully back at Snape. "I don't know exactly if he's more threatened or threatening, but, in the name of Merlin and the name of my magic, he will reach his trial alive. Nothing the Hounds or the Minister may try before then will touch him, I assure you."

Harry felt the oath settle into place around him, and knew it was all he was going to get from the Auror. She had already given him far more than she had to, probably out of pity for the child whose guardian could be so deceitful. He nodded, once. "Thank you," he said.

"Have you decided, Professor Snape?" Mallory's voice was calm, but her wand was pointed at Snape now. "Are you going to resist us, which will add an extra charge to your file, or come along quietly?"

Snape snarled, a low sound, but to Harry's relief, he did not burst out into one of the rages that had marked the last few days. He drew his wand from his sleeve and placed it, with great dignity, on the table, then turned and clasped his hands together behind his back. Mallory began promptly whispering spells that Harry thought were meant to confine Snape's magic and body.

He took the chance to turn to Tonks. She looked down at him, face more unhappy than ever. "Tonks," he whispered. "Can you speak to Scrimgeour when you get back to the Ministry? Tell him that I think the main motivation to arrest Snape was hatred and anger, and not justice?"

Tonks closed her eyes. "Harry..."

Harry knew he was asking a lot of her. It could get her sacked, and they weren't even really formal allies. But he went on asking, anyway, with his silence, and when Mallory finished the final spell, Tonks gave him a reluctant nod.

Harry squeezed her hand, hard, then stepped out of the way and watched in resignation as Mallory led Snape down from the head table. Tonks fell into place on the right side of him, and they marched him towards the doors. Harry found his courage before they got quite that far, and lifted his head, meeting the burning black gaze he knew would be waiting for him.

It bored into him and tore him apart, but Harry weathered it. He had lived through this nightmare of losing parents and mentors before. He could live through it again. He let Snape see what he thought he should see there, and watched anger melt into confusion. Then the moment was over, and the two Aurors were leading Snape far enough away that he could no longer turn his head to meet Harry's gaze without being obvious. He wouldn't do that, Harry knew. The one thing that Snape hated most was being obvious, letting his enemies see how they had hurt him.

Harry watched the Aurors leave the Great Hall. To him, it felt as if they walked in silence, for all that the roaring around him rivaled the ocean on the beach at Midsummer. He turned only when he heard the Headmaster rise to his feet and call for quiet, a reprimand with an edge of compulsion in it. Harry shrugged the compulsion off, and heard the Many give an angry hiss on his arm.

"Students, students," Dumbledore called, his voice sweet with sorrow. "Obviously this is a sad day, and we should be sad at losing a teacher of Professor Snape's caliber." Harry heard snorts that no one could have stifled exploding from every table but Slytherin's; Snape had been nothing but a harsh teacher to the other three Houses. "However, I have no doubt that he will be back among us shortly. In the meantime, I will take over his Potions classes myself, having a modicum of knowledge on the subject." He smiled gently, while the buzz of scorn and laughter turned to a sound of excitement. "I hope that no one will object to that?"

The sentiments that came back to him sounded to Harry most like "Hell no!" He shook his head, a faint smile appearing on his lips. Snape never had been popular, and then had sometimes wondered

aloud why more students didn't respect him than did. Harry had known it was impossible, even useless, to try and explain it to him.

"Then I declare all Potions classes canceled for today, so that I might have a day to learn the schedule and go over Professor Snape's lessons plans," said Dumbledore, and there came a series of appreciative whoops. In a softer tone, he added, "Please go sit back down, Mr. Potter."

Harry turned and glanced at Dumbledore. His eyes were bright, confident. He had never looked more like the general of the Light whom Lily had taught Harry to revere. "We will get him back," Dumbledore assured him.

Harry dipped his head, not meeting the other professors' eyes, and then hurried towards the Slytherin table. With Potions canceled, he had no classes for a few hours, and he wanted to consider what he was going to do before he did it.

Of course, he already had the stirrings of a plan, but it would be a costly one, and solve only half the problem. He would find a better one if he could.

At the Slytherin table, he accepted pats on the shoulder from Millicent, reassurances from Pansy, noises of sympathy from Blaise and Vince—Snape was at least their Head of House, if he was nothing else to them—and an unexpectedly swift, tight embrace from Draco, who didn't let him go until Harry told him, gently, that he really needed to go to Gryffindor Tower to see his brother. Then he didn't protest, and Harry found himself more grateful for that than anything since the Aurors had taken Snape away.

Taken Snape away.

Well, I'll just have to get him back, then.

Harry luckily—because he didn't know the latest Gryffindor password—arrived at the Fat Lady's portrait at the same time as Ron, Connor, and Hermione. Hermione took one look at Harry's face and tugged on Ron's arm, prompting him to fall behind. Ron blinked at her, looked ahead, saw Harry waiting, blinked some more, and then

abruptly nodded, his face going a bit red. He and Hermione stood behind, while Connor came forward to meet Harry alone.

"I swear, I didn't know Dad was going to do anything like that," Connor gasped desperately, halting just a few feet away from him.

Harry hugged his brother, surprising even himself. He hadn't realized how much he needed to touch someone right then. Maybe it was because his mind was whizzing along, barely seeming to be contained in his skull. "I know, I know," he whispered, as Connor's arms came up and tightened around him. "I know you would have told me if you had, just like you showed me his letter. And—well, I didn't know either. I thought he was going to do—something else." And now I'm going to do the something else. Harry took a hard breath through his nose. "I came to warn you. I really do love Dad, all right? And you. And even—even Mum." Just because he didn't want any more contact with someone didn't mean he stopped loving them, Harry had found. Love wasn't that easy to control. "I have to do something to help Snape, though. And this is the only thing I can think of to do. If it works right, it won't even make a mark. If it doesn't, then, well, just remember I love you. Really."

"Harry?" Connor's arms tightened abruptly around him. "Are you going to do something to hurt yourself?"

"Mentally," said Harry, startled. He thinks I would commit suicide, or threaten to? Of course not. There are too many people I can benefit by staying alive. "Not physically."

"Then I still don't want you to do it."

"I have to." Gently, Harry disentangled himself from Connor's arms. "I have to do what I can to protect Snape."

"Maybe I want to protect you for once." Connor folded his arms, scowling at him. "And I don't want you to do this if it'll hurt you in any way."

"I have to do something, Connor," Harry pointed out. "The Aurors already came and arrested Snape. It's already begun."

"Let him get out of it on his own," Connor hissed, and Harry was surprised to see malice in his eyes. "Damn it, Harry, I know you feel you owe him, you may even love him too, but didn't he bring this on himself? Let him deal with the consequences on his own. He should. Why should you have to sacrifice yourself again just to defend him?"

"Because a willing sacrifice is different from an unwilling one." Harry squeezed his arm. "And I have to shield him from this as much as I can."

"You forgive too much," Connor went on, hazel eyes glowing with that Gryffindor stubbornness that had caused so much trouble last year. Harry hoped that it wouldn't cause much now. Connor looked perfectly capable of tackling him and holding him on the floor to keep him here. "Sooner or later, Harry, people have to grow up. I had to. Snape's an adult. Why shouldn't he have to?"

Harry sighed. "There's a limit to what I can do to help him, that's for sure, but I would never feel good about myself I didn't try. I was partially the one who got him into this, by writing a letter with the antidote I sent to Remus."

"You had to," said Connor firmly. "Or Remus wouldn't have known what it was or who it was from."

"Yes, he would have. It came with Hedwig—" Harry shook his head and backed off the argument. "Never mind. I'm going to do this, and I just wanted to warn you, just in case it doesn't work the way I think it should." He gave his brother's shoulder one more clasp, and then backed off and slipped away, his hand ducking into his sleeve as he went. A squeeze to the quill-shaped amulet that waited there, and a certain person would know he had a story for her.

"Harry!" Connor shouted behind him, but Harry calmly cast a wandless Disillusionment Charm on himself so his brother couldn't follow him, and went to the Owlery, the place where he and Skeeter had agreed to meet.

“This better be good, Potter.” Skeeter’s voice came through a window of the Owlery.

Startled, Harry glanced out the window and saw her riding a broom, her stiff blonde curls swaying unnaturally in the wind, her entire body looking horribly uncomfortable as it crammed onto the broomstick. Harry couldn’t help grinning slightly as he beckoned for her to come through the window. He knew that there were wards that prevented anyone hostile from attacking the school on a broom, but evidently the wards didn’t consider Skeeter hostile.

They might as well have, if this blow actually lands.

“I was on the verge of just starting a story about your guardian’s arrest,” Skeeter complained, as she transferred herself awkwardly from the broomstick through the window. Harry bit his lip and resolutely didn’t laugh as she nearly tumbled into a pile of feathers and owl pellets. Skeeter brushed her dress off and turned to face him. “Now Honeywhistle’ll publish one first. She’s stuck to the Minister’s side lately.”

“I think this should fulfill both your personas—the truth-seeking heroine and the gossip-monger,” said Harry, becoming sober again as he thought about what was going to happen. “I have a story for you that’s connected to the arrest of my guardian. And to my blood father, as well.”

He ignored the rushing in his ears. Yes, he had wanted to keep this private. Yes, he had never wanted to show any part of it to the wizarding world, because why should he? It mattered to his family and no one else, no matter what Draco and Snape said.

And it will go on mattering only to my family and no one else, if Dad just does what he’s supposed to.

“Really.” Skeeter’s eyes sparkled as she waved her wand and conjured a chair to sit on. She drew her quill and a scroll of parchment out, and focused a keen glance on him. “I’m waiting.”

Harry had thought very carefully about how to phrase this—not the actual article, but how much he would tell Skeeter. He met her gaze calmly, and said, “I don’t know how much you know about my home life with my parents.”

“Not much,” said Skeeter. “I mean, I know about the Auror investigation into your parents last year. Something odd about that, wasn’t there? They were under Dark magic or something.” She cocked her head. “That was when I was more interested in writing about the Boy-Who-Lived. I could find my notes, though.”

Harry smiled grimly. “Your notes won’t tell you about this.” His own voice in his ears sounded thin and windy. He controlled the urge to just collapse, or to curl around the secret and hide it away forever. He had no right to be so selfish. Snape might need this.

And it’s the one thing that might convince Dad to back off, drop the charges, and stay backed off.

“My father spent almost all his time with my brother when we were children,” Harry began carefully. Leave Lily out of it. Leave your training out of it. You only want what will threaten James. “He cherished him more, laughed with him more, loved him more. The Dark magic incident last year? He was able to forget all about me under the persuasion of a simple spell.” Harry lifted an eyebrow, forced himself to adopt a cynical and mocking expression, and chuckled. “How loving a father is one who can forget his child like that?”

Skeeter’s quill was speeding across her parchment. That was all, Harry told himself. He was not about to faint. He had to be strong. Strong people didn’t faint.

“Why did he love your brother more?” she asked, peering at him.

Harry snorted. “Can you ask? Connor’s the Boy-Who-Lived.” He saw the spark catch in her eyes, and knew she would believe whatever followed from this point forward. They had linked his name to his brother’s in the first article against Fudge as a matter of politics, but Connor still had the larger fame, the bigger reputation. Skeeter would

be interested in and believe a tale of sibling jealousy and rivalry. Forgive me, Connor. Our relationship has improved out of all recognition in the past few months. But this is about James when we were still children. "And..." He trailed off on purpose, painted a pensive look on his face, and saw that he had her. Rita leaned forward, her quill brushing the edge of her teeth.

"What, what?" she urged.

Harry lowered his eyes as if embarrassed. In truth, he was forcing himself to consider these incidents as if they had happened to someone else. It was the only way to control the urge just to coil up into a tiny, tight ball and tell no one else, ever. Why would it matter to them? It was not important, could not possibly be important. James and Lily weren't criminals. They were parents who had done the best they could, trying to raise a baby who was the target of Voldemort's wrath—so far as anyone knew—and a son with magic too powerful for his own or anyone else's good. They did not deserve to be arrested or punished. They had made mistakes, and everyone did that.

But he stepped over and around and past that, told himself that this truth need not come to light if James would only do what he was supposed to, and said, "And he was scared of me." He flexed a hand, and let a small ball of light appear in front of him, drifting about and then winking out. No great deal, but he had done it without a wand and without a word. He looked up and met Skeeter's eyes. "You were there, you said, when I attacked the Minister and Umbridge."

Skeeter nodded.

Harry sighed. "So, I had the potential for magic like that as a young child, and my father was afraid of me. So he stayed distant from me." He laughed a bit. "You'd think he'd have wanted to befriend me, make me love him, so that I wouldn't ever turn on him, but that wasn't the way it worked out."

He choked back the astonishing wave of bitterness rising from his belly, and wondered about those contradictory impulses. Part of him,

it seemed, did want to tell the truth. Harry snorted. Why? So you can get sympathy? Weakness, Potter.

Skeeter scribbled industriously, and then looked up. To Harry's surprise, she seemed hesitant. She worried her lip with prominent front teeth for a moment. Harry remained still, wondering what in the world Skeeter would be nervous about asking.

He understood when she whispered, "Did he abuse you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, of course not! He never touched me." He winced when he realized how that sounded, and added, "Except in the way a parent should touch a child."

Skeeter went on staring at him. Then she said, in the voice of someone trying to be comforting when she didn't know how, "That isn't the only form of abuse."

Oh. Oh, fuck. I've got to get her off this track. I just want to threaten James with showing that he's not a model father. I don't want to give her even the idea that anything like abuse happened at home, or he really could be arrested, and Mum, too. No, no, never. I can't do that. I can't tear them apart and leave them bleeding in public like that. It's done, it's over with, it never needs to come up again.

"He just stayed distant from me," said Harry, and let a petulant, complaining tone slip into his voice. "I was a toy for him, someone he could play with when Connor was busy or asleep. And someone he was afraid of, of course, but he tried to mask that." He sighed and leaned his head back on the wall. "You know why he's trying to take me away from Snape?"

"Why?" Skeeter still looked a bit worried, but seized on the new distraction gratefully.

"Because he and Snape had a rivalry in Hogwarts." Harry gave a great sigh and buried his head in his hands. "They're both such children. Snape's striking back at him for the same reason, but at least, with Snape, it's expected, you know? He has a bad reputation already, as the Head of Slytherin House and a teacher most of the

students hate. You'd think my father would be the better man, but no. He just has to try and take a son he never cared about anyway when we were children away from Snape, because it's Snape who has me. And my father is supposed to be this glorious Light pureblood wizard and ex-Auror." Harry shook his head slowly back and forth, hair rustling. "You'd think he'd be the better man," he repeated.

He peered between his fingers to see how Skeeter was taking this, and saw the rapturous expression on her face as she wrote. He relaxed. For all her determination to make people admire her, Skeeter was a gossip-monger at heart. Little would please her more than taking down someone whom many Aurors and Ministry people still admired years after he'd left his position.

"Wonderful," said Skeeter at last, looking up. "I can do a lot just with this. The article should be out in a few days—"

"No," Harry interrupted.

Skeeter frowned at him. "Our deal—"

"I know what our deal is," said Harry. "But this is different. I can give you plenty of other stories. But this one is personal. Private. Special. I only agreed to give it out at all because James will just not bloody well give up. I want to use this to blackmail him instead. If he doesn't drop the charges against Snape, then—" The words stuck in his throat, but he forced them out. "Then you can publish it."

Skeeter hesitated, teetering. Harry watched her coolly. He understood her. She wanted the article published and people buying it, reading it, admiring her words in shocked whispers, James bleeding from the lash of a whip that he never saw coming.

On the other hand, she wanted the anticipation of it, too. And she wanted to be involved in intrigues at this level of power, to know things that other people didn't as well as just spreading them the moment she knew. She wanted to have power over another person. She had a chancy power right now, dictated not only by what articles she could publish but by the public interest, and her competition with Melinda Honeywhistle and other people, and how long the scandal

would run. Harry was offering her something else, something more political in nature—the chance to run before, not behind, events.

Besides, she must know that if she published this article when he didn't want her to, it was the last story she'd ever get from him.

Harry felt almost as if he were inside her head when Skeeter's eyes lifted to his face and she nodded. He had looked in one of the registry books in the Hogwarts library just to satisfy his curiosity, but he really hadn't needed to. He already knew, on instinct, that Rita Skeeter had been a Slytherin.

"Can I at least write the article and send it to him?" she asked, her voice plaintive.

Harry arched an eyebrow. "Of course. As long as it doesn't slip out, even accidentally, to anyone else."

"No," said Skeeter, her voice a deep purr. "Of course not."

"Send it with this letter," Harry instructed her, and pulled a piece of parchment from his back pocket. "It explains everything in the simplest terms. He drops the charges, or he gets smeared across the front pages of the wizarding world." He paused and gave her a stern look. "He's got a week to drop the charges. If the article shows up before then, I will be very upset, Rita." He hissed at the Many, and the little snake stuck its head out from under his sleeve and hissed back at him.

Skeeter's face paled. "Is that—"

"A South African hive cobra. Yes." Harry stroked the Many's neck, and let the tongue tickle his hand. He made his voice cheery. "Did you know that if one of them spits in your eyes, it blinds you, and there's no cure for that condition?"

Skeeter let out a sharp breath. "Really, no need to threaten me, Potter," she muttered as she stood. "I want to keep this secret for right now as much as you do."

Harry shrugged. "Just making sure." He handed her the letter to James, then watched her get on the broomstick and settle herself again. She gave him a long, slow look that combined many things. Harry saw some fear and respect in there, though, and was content.

"See you later, Potter," she said, and then pushed the broomstick out the Owlery window.

Harry closed his eyes and stood still for a long time. He could only hope James would see sense and not let himself and his family be dragged screaming into the public eye. Granted, he hadn't seen sense before now, but, on the other hand, he hadn't faced a threat this severe. Harry intended to make him back off or bleed in public, one or the other.

And if he bled, too, at least he had chosen to do so.

He opened his eyes and shook his head. I've done all I can for now, especially since the charges were true. I'll wait and see if Scrimgeour can't do something about the Minister before I move on that front.

And if he didn't hurry, he would be late to Charms, anyway.

PLEASE NOTE: This is Chapter 21, not 20. Yes, I know there were problems getting to Chapter 20, "Cry Havoc," yesterday. Yes, I did repost and post another copy of the chapter, trying to correct this, and it didn't work. That was a problem with this site, rather than just this one story. I deleted the extra copy of the chapter and let the second one become Chapter 20 (or Chapter 25 according to the numbering here). I'm very sorry if you can't access it, but it isn't something I can help. I also post on my livejournal and my Skyehawke account, the addresses of which are in my profile, and you can always look there if this site won't let you read the new chapters. This chapter is not going to make sense if you haven't read "Cry Havoc."

Chapter Twenty-One: To Be Slytherin

Rufus was glad that he had at least got to finish his morning tea before Aurors Tonks and Mallory returned from Hogwarts with Snape. It gave him some time to lean back, ease his nerves, and consider what, exactly, he was going to do.

Amelia had tried to pretend this was just another ordinary arrest. It wasn't, not when the Minister himself had laid charges against the prisoner. It could not be, not when the charges were filed in concert with a different set of charges by a man who had reason to hate the prisoner. It came just after the Minister himself was accused of abducting the child at the heart of this storm. And the prisoner was the guardian of a child with Lord-level power, who could make life very difficult for the Ministry if they decided the wrong way.

It was all, Rufus considered as he took another sip of his tea, quite complicated. A good job for Amelia that I'm currently the Head of the Aurors, and know Potter, and am aware of all these complexities.

He set the teacup aside and studied the papers sprawled all over his desk. He had discovered enough information to take him close to his ultimate goal. He'd intended to wait, though. A large part of any strategy was timing. He couldn't just charge in and accuse the Minister of the things that the papers proved he had, in fact, done. He would need to go through a careful legal process, and he had to pick just when it was best to begin and end the process.

But, then again, he thought, lifting his eyes to his door as he heard footsteps pound among the desks outside it, sometimes the circumstances around me shift, and don't give me the chance.

Someone banged on the door. Rufus rolled his eyes and nodded to young Percy, who sat on the other side of the room, copying down one of the less important papers. Percy jumped, as though he found his superior's gesture more startling than the noise, and then hurried over to open the door.

Rufus watched his back, thoughtfully. Percy didn't say much anymore, just copied and listened and grew more and more pale by the day. Rufus wondered if he even realized how much he was learning, and that Rufus's main purpose in taking him under his wing wasn't to control one of Dumbledore's spies. Probably not, though. Percy was still too caught up in the perceived drama of having betrayed his family by refusing the position his father had secured for him.

Tonks hurried through the door the moment it opened, nearly crushing Percy to the wall. A moment later, she measured her full length on the floor in front of Rufus's desk. Rufus just raised an eyebrow and waited for her to speak. The girl was a good Auror. He would defend her to anyone who asked. At least she didn't try to mumble without lifting her face, the way that someone more embarrassed with her own clumsiness might have done.

"Sir," Tonks gasped, "I spoke with Harry—I mean, with Potter, when Mallory and I went to the school to arrest Professor Snape. He wanted me to talk with you and see if there was anything you could do to help his guardian."

Rufus blinked once, twice, then shook his head. He still wasn't used to someone with Lord-level power who asked instead of demanded. Dumbledore would have been here already, trying to cozen the Minister out of the charges, if this was someone who truly mattered to him. Other Lords Rufus had been familiar with, past and future, would have had no qualms about trying to tear the Ministry down. Potter still asked.

Or trusted me to handle it.

Rufus stamped on the peculiar feeling of warmth rising in his chest. He could not afford to be that partisan. He liked the boy, yes, but his Ministry came first. If the boy had been making accusations against Cornelius without merit, then Rufus would have gone after him just as easily for wasting an Auror's time. It was just good that there was dirt on Cornelius, and that so far Potter seemed to understand that he couldn't just come in and take over the Ministry.

"I will indeed do so," he said, and saw Tonks's face ease. Hmmm. "Auror Tonks," he added, as she stood up again and swiped dust from her robes.

"Yes, sir?" She glanced up at him. Her brown hair was already turning green, a much more cheerful color.

"I hope you remember," said Rufus gently, "that our allegiances are always to each other and the rule of law first and foremost, above any personal loyalties that we might have."

Tonks promptly blushed, even growing larger cheeks to blush in. "Yes, sir," she said, more meekly. "I just—well, I met the boy over the summer, when he was still living with his blood father. I just wish he didn't have such a hectic life. It's not good for him. Or for anyone else, if he gets too stressed and strained," she added. "Sir."

Rufus nodded. "Harry Potter has a way of collecting people," he said. "Simply make sure that you are not blinded by the cloth of his pocket."

Tonks flushed even more brightly, but just nodded and managed to back out of the office without a word or a fall. Rufus sat back behind his desk and held out a hand. Percy was already there, hovering, and handed him a folder with a copy of all the case parchments in it, from the original document filed by James Potter claiming his child back to the latest round of charges.

Rufus looked over them swiftly one more time, as he heard the unmistakable sound of Auror Mallory's voice lecturing a prisoner on how good he had it. No, he was finding nothing to contradict his basic

impression of reading between the lines. Yes, Potter was going to be upset, and had the right to be. No, Rufus did not believe the timing of these latest charges was a coincidence, and he did not think that the Minister was only acting in a disinterested way for the good of the wizarding community.

But that still meant Severus Snape was an idiot.

Snape kept his head high and his eyes locked forward, not deigning to return the stares of the lesser men and women who sat among their desks and chased paper for a living. The infernal witch with him would not shut up, but that did not mean he had to pay attention to her. She must have been a Gryffindor, he thought, to have so much to talk about even after their journey outside the school and their Apparition to the Ministry.

“...don’t realize how lucky you have it, not really. Auror Scrimgeour is overseeing this case himself. Of course, the circumstances are rather unusual, since after all he did lead the investigation of the boy’s parents last year. Couldn’t have the parents of the Boy-Who-Lived infested with Dark magic, could we? And Auror Scrimgeour hates Dark magic. But what he found was rather unusual. Of course, you probably know about that. Might have been the one who cast it...”

No, Snape thought, lured into paying attention in spite of himself, that was Harry.

Harry.

He knew that the boy had not meant to write any words that could be used as evidence against Snape; that was only too clear in the moments after Mallory had announced what had happened. His ward’s eyes had been distressed, his face clearly revealing the emotions the charge called up inside him. But it had still happened, and Snape wanted to grab and shake the boy for it. Why hadn’t Harry anticipated that particular consequence of his actions? Wasn’t he Slytherin enough to do so?

And why had he brewed that particular antidote for James, when he knew full well that Snape did not believe James deserved it?

Snape shook off the thoughts when he realized how close they were to the Head Auror's office, and did his best to settle himself into his cold thoughts again. If that bloody phoenix hadn't come and showed him the vision of his burned notes—notes that he now wondered about, given that Harry must have come into his office to learn how to brew the antidote for James—then he would still be all right. He could face any accusations effortlessly, fend off any shows of concern or nattering about the letter of the law. With the ice gone, and inconvenient emotions once more sliding through him like frogs through muddy water, he wondered what could be done.

I will find out, he thought, as Mallory opened the door to the office and ushered him through. Scrimgeour is Harry's ally. That ought to count for something.

"Here he is, sir," said the infernal woman, and deposited him roughly in a chair in front of Scrimgeour's desk. Snape turned and gave her a long, slow glare. Mallory gave no sign that she'd noticed it was happening. "Would you like me to stay, or do you think that you can handle him alone? His hands and his magic are bound, and I have his wand. I made sure of that," she added.

Snape stiffened in rage. He hadn't even noticed her picking up his wand from the head table. His back had been to it, granted, but he ought to have done. His hands squirmed inside the tight bonds of the silver cords she had fastened about them, yearning to be free. Let me only get one spell on my lips, and I will show them what a Dark wizard can do.

Then he told himself to be still, and stopped moving his fingers. He was acting childish again, ridiculously. This was not the kind of thing his mother had told him to do, not the kind of thing that any wizard who had gone cold to survive would do. He breathed deeply, trying to relax, trying to rise above the emotions and see everything clearly, calmly, rationally.

"Thank you, Auror Mallory, I think I can question him on my own," said Scrimgeour's voice, and Snape focused on him again. The man was sitting casually behind his desk, in a posture that probably eased

his bad leg, but at the same time looked entirely natural. His yellow eyes hadn't looked away from Snape once since he'd been brought into the office. "But please, stand right outside the door. When I am done questioning the prisoner, I'll need you to escort him to a holding cell."

"Of course, sir," said the infernal witch, and bowed, and exited the office. Snape relaxed a bit. It had been unnerving, traveling confined with someone who was as strong as she was. No, she could not challenge him, not quite. But that margin of error was too small for comfort when his hands and his magic were so expertly bound up.

He knew that the Auror would probably defend him if they were suddenly attacked, but that was no guarantee that he would be safe from her.

"Ah, Snape."

Snape's eyes snapped back to Scrimgeour as the door shut. This was not how he had expected the interrogation to go, not with the Auror's former manner and one of the younger Weasley spawn in the office. The elder wizard was leaning forward, and looked almost pleasant.

Snape scrutinized his face for a moment, carefully. He is Harry's ally, and he was Slytherin. Does he intend to go easy on me because of that? Was all his calmness before only a façade to fool that woman?

"You're an idiot," said Scrimgeour.

Snape blinked for a long moment, cursing himself for being caught off-guard like that, and for not being prepared with a retort more quickly than he was. At last he narrowed his eyes and was able to say, "I would think this would constitute abuse of prisoners. I see you are continuing that fine Ministry tradition." But it took far too long, and Scrimgeour watched him, not with anger at having his methods compared to Fudge's abduction of Harry, but with cheerful contempt in his eyes.

“Not at all abuse, Severus,” said Scrimgeour. “May I call you Severus? Of course I may. I’m older than you are, and considerably cleverer, if the way you’ve acted in the last month is any indication. You are an idiot. Head of Slytherin House, Potions Master, and yet you couldn’t chose any subtler way to show your enemies your disfavor?” He shook his head, clucking his tongue. “Such a disappointment, when the wizard who’s been out of the House for more than forty years has to scold the one who’s been in daily contact with it for two decades and more. You haven’t been acting very Slytherin, Severus. The very fact that you’ve been caught shows me that.”

Snape could, if he turned his head, see the gaping eyes and mouth of the young Weasley. He felt rather gut-punched himself, though of course he did not allow his eyes to widen or his mouth to fall open in that undignified manner. The cold barriers shattered and fell away from his mind completely, and the frogs of his emotions stirred and swam.

Scrimgeour seemed to take his stunned silence as invitation to continue. “Where have your mistakes come from? Oh, there have been so many, it will take some time to enumerate them all. First, you did not pursue legal action against Cornelius immediately after the abduction. And why not? You had an eyewitness in the form of Harry. You could have filed charges against him. And you did not. Even if Harry didn’t want to, Severus, you should have. You have the ambition and ruthlessness necessary to get the Minister sacked, and if you had used that flood of outrage in the first days after Skeeter’s article was published, you might have managed. But you made no motion. I wonder why?

“I’ll tell you why. You wanted to punish your enemies more personally. That’s always been a Slytherin weakness, you know—wanting to stand over the writhing bodies of those we hate and gloat. But it’s an avoidable weakness. It’s certainly not one that I would have expected you to fall victim to.”

Snape found his tongue at last. “What is this?” he said. It did not sound like a splutter, he was sure, because Severus Snape did not splutter. “What right do you have to lecture me about my actions? I

believed this was an interrogation, held according to formal legal rules—“

“Oh, it is,” said Scrimgeour. He leaned back and folded his arms, smiling at Snape, looking as if he were in immense good humor. “I’m simply interrogating your stupidity, Severus, and no lesser culprit. And I don’t need Veritaserum, or the beating that you no doubt expected. A good dash of intelligence and the expressions on your face are my only tools.

“Then comes the second mistake. You did not take steps to prevent your past actions, including your reputation as a Death Eater, from being used against you. Why? That was another easily avoidable blind spot, and you ignored it. Perhaps that was only a continuation of a past mistake, though, and not a new one,” Scrimgeour added, in a musing tone. “You’ve acted for the past thirteen years as though no one would come after you for that, as long as you hid at Hogwarts and taught. But, on the other hand, it was an issue last year when we were arranging your legal guardianship of young Harry. That’s another thing you could have used that flood of good publicity to do, you know: show yourself forth as a good guardian. But you did not.” Scrimgeour paused to give him a single, severe censuring look.

“I have nothing to say to you,” said Snape, and lifted his chin, and looked away. Unfortunately, the only things to look at in the office were the photographs, which were utterly ridiculous in their number and display, or the Weasley, who still hadn’t shut his mouth.

“And then there was the third mistake, and, I think, your greatest,” Scrimgeour said, as if he had not heard or did not care about Snape’s declaration. “Severus, Severus, Severus. Really. Gryffindors are the ones who let schoolboy rivalries rule their lives and influence their legal wrangles decades later. Slytherins use the good parts of their school experiences and put the past behind them. You did not. Perhaps you could not, though in truth, I hope it is not that second thing. We do not need someone who cannot let go of his past raising a child as powerful as Harry.”

Snape’s hands clenched in his bonds, and he resisted the urge to snap that Scrimgeour knew nothing, nothing, about either what

Snape had suffered at the hands of James Potter and his friends, or the savage abuse Harry had taken from his family. He was not speaking. His sudden words would have to hold the force of a vow, even in the face of this extreme provocation.

“And so you used a potion with such obvious and traceable effects,” Scrimgeour said, his voice slightly muffled. Snape darted a glance at him, and found the Auror with his head in his hands, shaking it sadly. “In front of witnesses, no less. You make me despair of you, Severus. Are you sure that the Sorting Hat said Slytherin and not Hufflepuff? Though, in truth, your loyalty would only be to yourself.” He lifted his head and gave Snape a patronizing stare it seemed he must have learned from Dumbledore. “No, on second thought, I believe it must have said Gryffindor. This is the kind of rash, hot-headed thing that one of them would do.”

“I was a Slytherin!” Snape hissed between his teeth, and then clenched his jaw, berating himself for letting the other man bait him.

“Yes,” said Scrimgeour. “I knew that. Just not a very good one, Severus. Or you would have noticed your own mistakes and corrected them before now.

“So you not only used a potion with such obvious and traceable effects, you left it intact, rather than brewing the antidote and sending it undetectably.” Scrimgeour closed his eyes and shook his head in sorrow. “Wanting an enemy to suffer is no good when it obstructs your goals. And I would have said that your goal was to retain guardianship of young Harry.”

Scrimgeour opened his eyes and fixed Snape with a sudden, scorching stare. “But perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps, after all, you took up this guardianship not to benefit the boy, but to get one over on his father.”

“I did not!” Snape found himself lurching forward in his chair, his emotions swirling and kicking up to the surface of his mind. “James Potter would be nothing to me if he would stop trying to take Harry back!”

"You should have let him be nothing to you regardless," said Scrimgeour, his face utterly stern now. "A Slytherin does what he knows will do him and his friends and allies good, and he does it undetectably. I know we are very different in our allegiances, Severus, but I would have thought we were at least alike in that."

"This slipping of an unknown potion to the Minister, in such a way that it left traces Augustus Starrise could notice, is the last straw, the mistake that truly makes me think you are worthy of being arrested and sent to the new equivalent of Azkaban. Did you plan to kill him, Severus, or blackmail him?"

Blackmail, Snape thought, and bit his tongue to avoid letting it out. Scrimgeour seemed to see the answer in his face, though, and nodded.

"You have lost control," the Auror said, softly, almost kindly. "You have let your anger outrun you, and you have made no effort to restrain yourself. And now it has torn gaping wounds in both you and young Harry. I don't like that on a personal level, I must admit, especially after I went to such lengths to insure that you could retain guardianship of the boy."

He leaned forward across his desk, his eyes never wavering from Snape's face. "But more, I am offended as a Slytherin. Why did you act the way you have done, Severus? Why? Give me one honest answer."

Snape closed his eyes and breathed harshly. He was acting like an emotional idiot. If only he could rebuild his walls, then he could answer as a mature, rational adult—

A mature, rational adult who had made all those mistakes that Scrimgeour talked about while behind his ice walls.

Snape went still. For a moment, a shudder seemed to invade his stomach and creep up towards his throat, and, incredulous, he wondered if he were actually about to vomit the small breakfast he had eaten. Then he realized his hands were clasped so tightly in his

bonds that his wrists seemed about to tear the ropes. He shook his head, sharply, once, not even sure what he was denying.

“Come, Severus,” said Scrimgeour, his voice stripped of all its spite. “You can tell me. You must tell me. I think I deserve an answer, after laying out all your mistakes for you and making you see them in a new light.”

A new light. Snape fought down the urge to laugh hysterically. Yes, one might call it that.

He looked back on the last month in his mind, a mixture of his own memories and Scrimgeour’s words, and shook. Had he truly done that? Had he truly been that stupid? It seemed impossible. As if awakening from a dream, he could see the insanity potion and the Meleager Potion, and he wondered what in Merlin’s name he had thought he was doing. Their creation was at once a combination of the most cunning intelligence and the most mind-numbing stupidity. Oh, yes, all very well to create an untraceable potion, but then to feed it to the Minister in such a way...and to create such effects with the insanity potion that the wretched woman in the Department of Magical Family and Child Services would know something was wrong, because the effects only began when Snape showed up...

And Harry.

He had said he would train the boy in Dark Arts so he could defend himself, and yet, he had not explained more than a quarter of the spells he showed him—the best times to use them, the variations on the incantations that would produce more or less subtle results, the ability to cloak them behind similar Light spells that had allowed Dark wizards to survive for centuries undetected by the Ministry. He had simply demonstrated, and expected Harry to understand immediately. The boy had imitated him, flawlessly most of the time, and not demanded the explanations. Snape had been creating a killing machine with not the least idea of discretion in employing the spells, the very thing he had said he was going to stop.

He had not thought, for one moment, that Potter might not take the consequences of the insanity potion lying down, or that Harry might

investigate and brew the antidote, at his brother's urging if not his own. He had not thought of what Augustus Starrise might notice when entering Fudge's office just after they left. He had not thought of anything, but simply reacted in a short-sighted manner, bulling ahead.

He had not even checked, at least in the last two weeks, what the book Draco was using might have done to the boy.

Snape closed his eyes and released a long hiss.

He had been acting more Gryffindor than he ever had in his life.

He opened his eyes and answered Scrimgeour's question. "I did all that because I was behaving idiotically."

The Auror simply stared at him for a long moment. Then he smiled, as though approving a rather slow student who had at last managed to master an essential lesson. "Very good," he murmured. "Good. There may be some hope for you after all." He tapped a hand on the parchments spread on his desk, though Snape couldn't read them from this angle. "I have some plans to set in motion, plans that this debacle has only encouraged me to speed up, not create. But it will go much more smoothly if I know that you are not intent on causing more trouble."

"What do you want me to do?" Snape asked, his throat tight. It made him feel a fool, still, to ask for advice, but after Scrimgeour had enthusiastically ripped open his other mistakes, he didn't see that had a choice.

"The smart thing," said Scrimgeour. "The subtle thing, that will make your enemies overconfident. The Slytherin thing. Bow your head and sit still for right now. No one will be looking for a threat coming from you, and they shouldn't have to. You're arrested. You sit there, and you look humble and penitent. Appearance is half of everything at this stage in the game. If you rage and spit and persevere in your idiocy, you only hand your enemies your wand."

Snape felt his hands flex in his bonds, this time out of instinct. “I hate being helpless,” he said. “I began this in the first place so that I would not have to feel that way.”

Scrimgeour gave him an unimpressed look. “Then I think you should reconsider your feelings and your hatred,” he said, standing. “You’re not helpless, anyway. You’re being helped. I am certainly going to do everything in my power to do so, and young Harry is already moving, or I don’t know him.”

Snape blinked. Another consequence I did not consider. “But what can he do?” he asked. “He has you as an ally in the Ministry, but no one else that I know of.”

“He has the Skeeter woman on his side.” Scrimgeour’s voice was extremely dry. “He’ll appeal to her first, I should imagine. And after that...who knows? The Dark wizards I met that day would be a good start.” He raised his voice. “Auror Mallory! I need you to escort the prisoner to a holding cell.”

As the office door started to open again, Scrimgeour gathered the papers on the desk together with a wave of his wand. They massed in front of him, hovering, and Scrimgeour used the sound to conceal his murmur to Snape. “I mean it, Severus. No more idiocies, however you might think they can help. Leave it up to other people to defend and protect you, since you’ve put yourself in the position of having to be defended and protected.”

Snape lowered his eyes instead of snapping out an immediate reply, as was his impulse. None of his impulses in the past month appeared to have been right.

“Are prisoners allowed to send post?” he asked abruptly, as Mallory gathered the cords around his wrists together and hauled him up.

“It will be read before you send it,” said Scrimgeour. “But yes.”

Snape nodded stoically. He desperately needed to send a letter to Harry, and one to Draco—carefully-worded, of course, because he did not want to think of Harry’s reaction if he learned, at this stage,

that Snape had set a compulsion on Draco and it had gone wrong. That could come later. Harry had to worry about getting his friend free, first.

“Come on, you,” said Auror Mallory, and tugged at his bonds.

“Careful, Fiona,” said Scrimgeour, just a touch of rebuke in his voice. “He is no longer quite as stupid as he was when he came here.”

The tugging eased at once, and Mallory led Snape towards the lifts, which, he suspected, would bear him to a holding cell where he would have much time to think.

He actually welcomed that. He felt as if he needed it. Rufus started to leave his office, and then turned back and collected Percy with a glare. The boy shut his permanently gaping jaw and hurried after him, but he did whisper, as they wended their way through the desks, “Sir, why did you allow me to hear that?”

“Because I thought you needed to hear it,” said Rufus crisply, not glancing back at him. The boy was one of those potential Aurors who had never considered the career, and who needed to be carefully nurtured into it. It was about time that Percy had his eyes opened to some of the wonderful, necessary, but unofficial things about working in the Ministry and defending the rights of ordinary witches and wizards. A dressing-down, rather than an interrogation, was sometimes called for.

Actually, Rufus felt sure Percy had already grasped that. The tricky thing would be teaching the boy the subtle art of reading people so that he would know when a dressing-down would work and when it would not.

And he was about to learn something else—perfectly legal, but not truly official, much like the waltz of paperwork that Scrimgeour had danced through the summer months, foiling incompetent busybodies who were trying to find some way to punish young Harry for freeing the Dementors. It was not his fault if they could not keep up with him. The truly intelligent and committed people in the Ministry, the ones

working to keep it free of any one interest's or Lord's touch or taint, would have been able to follow him. Rufus could salute a worthy opponent.

He was on his way to make one of them into an ally, at the moment. He halted in front of the glass door displaying her name and knocked once.

"Come in!" came the call, and Rufus opened it and strode in.

Amelia Bones looked up from behind her desk, adjusting the monocle in one eye so that she could see him better. She was a short witch, her hair graying, but her outthrust jaw and piercing eyes gave her all the authority she would ever need. She'd been the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for over a decade, and she looked calmly at him now, as if she knew what he carried in his hands and was unimpressed.

Rufus knew she didn't know anything about this, though, because he trusted her integrity. He laid his bundle of papers on the desk and nodded to them. "The top three only," he said.

He knew very well that only his long acquaintance with her allowed him to get away with this, but the thing was, he would get away with it. He was busy being a better Slytherin than Severus Snape could be in a month of Sundays. The long slow look that Amelia gave him showed it, as she then turned and began to read the stack of papers after giving him that long slow look.

Her face paled. She shot her eyes back to Rufus. "You're absolutely sure about this?" she whispered.

Rufus nodded to the documents. "These are copies of the ones from the archives, Amelia, but I can retrieve the originals easily enough. Yes, Fudge did create these Hounds, and yes, he did hire Aurors we'd sacked for using Dark magic without permission to staff them, and yes, he did capture and try at least one other person in secret before young Mr. Potter." Rufus felt his jaw twitch. The Minister often did that to him. "And he—executed at least three more."

“Call it murder,” said Amelia, even as she went back to reading. “Not execution.”

Rufus felt free to relax and take a chair, massaging his aching leg as he did so. Percy hovered behind him, not seeming to know what else to do with himself. Rufus shrugged. The art of gracefully standing in a corner was another one that the boy would have to learn.

Amelia made it halfway through the third paper before she drew her wand and hexed a mirror she kept in the corner of her office. It shattered, but the pieces of glass only flew a short way out of the frame before reassembling themselves. Rufus smiled slightly. Most Heads of Departments had a mirror like that somewhere in their offices, for stress relief if nothing else.

“Something must be done,” said Amelia flatly, turning to him. “But what? What, for Merlin’s sake? We won’t have another election for three years, and the full Wizengamot has to agree unanimously to sack the Minister. They won’t. I know they won’t. He has too many bought allies.”

“There’s another thing the Wizengamot can do,” said Rufus, leaning forward. “And you only need a simple majority there, not consensus.”

Amelia stared at him for a moment longer. Then hope and color surged into her face, and she smiled sharply at him. Rufus smiled back at her.

“You weren’t a Slytherin for nothing, were you,” Amelia murmured. It wasn’t a question. “Very well, Rufus. I’ll call for a vote of no confidence. But you know that it can’t be done that quickly. It might be near the end of November before the Wizengamot votes.”

“I know,” said Rufus. “I don’t want to hurry it, Amelia. I want to rip out every weed that Cornelius has planted here. We’ll do everything nice and legal and proper, and that way no one can accuse us of anything.” It always amazed him how few people thought of legal solutions. Handle them right, and it was extremely hard for an opponent to challenge you. And Rufus Scrimgeour had always believed in neutralizing opponents or persuading them over to his

side. None of this letting them have ground to bring charges against him instead, the way Severus Snape seemed to think was best.

Amelia nodded slightly. "And even then, it won't be easy," she warned him. Rufus thought she was speaking against her own hope as much as his. "Cornelius still has money behind him, and not everyone will be persuaded by the new evidence."

"If I'm right," Rufus murmured, "some of Cornelius's more fanatical supporters have convinced him that his fear of the Dark is justified, and they're using the chance to strike mostly against Dark wizards, through him. That means the Light pureblooded families, and one in particular. I think I know a way to take out most of his support at a single blow."

Amelia knew him too well, at least once he revealed his plans. Her eyes narrowed. "And what will it cost us, Rufus?"

"If I fail? My support. I'll have to step back," said Rufus. "But I really do not anticipate that happening."

Amelia stared at him for a long moment. Rufus stared back, calmly. This was the way things had to happen. And there were some risks that couldn't be lessened. The one he was about to take was one of them.

Amelia sighed, at last, and nodded. "Then go do whatever it is that you're going to do," she said. "And don't let me hear about it."

Rufus smiled grimly at her and stood. "I assure you, Amelia," he said, "the wizard I'm about to challenge will keep everything perfectly legal and respectable."

She winced at the word challenge, but her eyes were steady. "As you will, then," she said.

Rufus inclined his head at her, and then strode out of the office, young Percy in tow. The poor boy looked ruffled. Well, he was getting quite an education this morning.

And he was about to get a deeper one.

“Rufus Scrimgeour. This is an unexpected pleasure.”

Rufus bowed slightly, as much as he could with his head in the flames of the hearth, never taking his eyes off the face of the wizard in front of him. Augustus Starrise sat calmly on a divan covered in cloth of gold, his hair braided with the usual bells that proclaimed his status as a dueling war wizard, and thus his utter contempt of the need to move in silence, because no enemy could take him. His hand rested on a glass of wine, but he'd put it down when his house elves told him who was waiting to talk to him. His eyes were piercing and curious, both at once.

“Mr. Starrise,” said Rufus, the words spilling easily from his lips, “I have come to challenge you to single combat, under the terms of the Sunset Accords of 1163, a week from today.”

Augustus blinked slightly, very slightly, and then inclined his head. “The price to be the usual one?” he asked quietly. “No meddling in politics of any kind for the loser, for a year after the victory?”

“I am willing to extend it,” said Rufus. He could not let his prey avoid this trap. “Five years, if necessary. Yes, if I lose, I step back, Augustus. And if you lose, you step back from your support of Cornelius.”

The Light wizard closed his eyes for a moment, and then shook his head, making his bells ring. “A year should be sufficient, I think,” he said. “I accept your challenge. A week from today, we dance.” He opened his eyes and gave Rufus a smile that brought back old, old memories. “I look forward to it.”

“Under the sunset be it sealed,” said Rufus, and pulled his head back from the flames, brushing the soot from his hair.

He straightened and met Percy Weasley's horrified, fascinated gaze. The young wizard swallowed several times before he could move his tongue. Rufus waited, and watched, massaging the old wound in his leg.

“It’s a duel, then?” Percy finally managed to whisper.

Rufus nodded. “What you heard. The dance for this duel locks onto the wizard once the combat has taken place. If Augustus loses, then he won’t be able to give money or support to Cornelius any more—or anyone else, for that matter—for a full year. If I lose, then I can do nothing more than act in my position as Head of the Aurors for a full year. No office politics, no Ministry politics, no maneuvers of the kind I suggested to Severus or Amelia.”

Percy shivered and stared at him. “What happens if someone meddles in politics anyway, after that?” he whispered.

“Well, that’s only happened twice,” said Rufus. “The magic coming and cutting off a limb if the offending wizard breaks his word is considered sufficient price.”

Percy closed his eyes and shivered again. “Do you think you can take him, sir?” he asked.

Rufus half-closed his eyes, memories flashing behind his eyelids. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “He gave me this scar.” He drew back the sleeve of his robe to show a long, pale mark twining around his wrist and up towards his shoulder. “That came from the last duel I fought against him. I lost.”

Percy all but squeaked. “But, sir, if you lose—”

“I know,” said Rufus. “But I don’t intend to.”

Percy only stared at him.

Rufus rolled his eyes and made for the lifts. Use the weapons against your enemies that will work, that will utterly prevent them from troubling you in the future. Against an idiotic Slytherin, exposure of his idiocy. Against a Light wizard, Light dances.

I do not see why this lesson is so hard to understand.

Chapter 22: And Unleash The Dogs of War

James folded his arms, bowed his head forward on his desk, and left it there.

He could hear sounds, if he listened for them: the steady fall of rain outside Lux Aeterna's windows, the sound of a Levitation Charm being snapped at a heavy trunk, and then the sound of footsteps as they made their smooth way down the stairs. He didn't want to hear them. Or rather, he wanted to hear them, but only so they would drown out the sound of the written words echoing in his mind.

What he most wanted, silence, was impossible.

After a few moments, James raised his head, blinked, ran a hand through his hair, and then drew the envelope lying on the desk towards him again. Two papers protruded from it. He shoved the larger one away with what he knew was an expression of disgust, and picked up the smaller one, a simple square of parchment.

The hand and the message were equally simple and unpretentious.

Father:

I know what you have done to Snape. I want him back. So I am going to release the information about the part you played in my childhood unless you drop the charges you filed against him. You have a week from the day of Snape's arrest to drop them. If you don't, then one way or another, I am no longer your son.

Harry.

James's fingers twitched, and he resisted the temptation to look again at the letter, to try to find something in it that his son had never put there. Simple, straightforward, heartbreakingly clear, it left no room for doubt. Harry hated him.

Just as Remus said he would.

James squashed that thought, too, and picked up the larger piece of paper. It wasn't published yet; he had Merlin to thank for that. But it had been made up like a newspaper article, and the headline stood out at the top in damning letters.

HARRY POTTER NEGLECTED BY OWN FATHER

Brother of Boy-Who-Lived Reveals That His Father Regarded Him as a Toy

By: Rita Skeeter

In a shocking disclosure, Harry Potter, the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived and the recent victim of alleged abduction by Minister Fudge, has revealed that his father, James Potter, who recently filed charges against Severus Snape for misuse of an insanity potion, neglected him as a child.

Potter, 14, refuses to call it abuse, but does say that his father paid more attention to Connor Potter, his famous brother, than he did to his elder son. The small family lived, together with Lily Evans Potter, James Potter's Muggleborn wife, in a house at Godric's Hollow for most of the boys' childhood.

"He just stayed distant from me," explained Potter, in a private conversation with this reporter yesterday morning. "I was a toy for him, someone he could play with when Connor was busy or asleep. And someone he was afraid of, of course, but he tried to mask that." Potter believes his father may have been afraid of him for his magical power, which, as before reported in *The Prophet*, has reached Lord-level since last November.

Potter also believes that his father's filing of charges against Severus Snape, his guardian for the past year, rests not on a deep desire to have his elder son back, but on what he calls a "rivalry" between the two men forged in their Hogwarts years.

Potter admitted that Professor Snape has a bad reputation as the Head of Slytherin House, but also that he would have expected better of his father, a "glorious Light pureblood wizard and ex-Auror."

James Potter gave up his Auror position shortly after the attack on his sons on Halloween of 1981, in which Connor Potter defeated You-Know-Who. It was believed at the time that he wanted to go into hiding with his family, but according to his son, all was far from domestic bliss in the Potter home.

“My father spent almost all his time with my brother when we were children,” Potter explained. “He cherished him more, laughed with him more, loved him more...How loving a father is one who can forget his child like that?”

Potter added that, since Connor is the Boy-Who-Lived, he would have expected decreased parental attention to himself, but he still somewhat resented his father for challenging another man’s guardianship of him.

“And he was scared of me,” he stated. Potter believes that his potential for Lord-level magic scared his father away from him, and that, as he has the same potential now, nothing has truly changed in the way his father perceives him.

The charges against Severus Snape include improper use of newly-created potions and failure to register such potions with the Ministry. His trial has so far been set, tentatively, for the middle of December. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore has taken over Potions classes at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

James Potter has so far been unavailable for comment.

James sat back and rubbed his eyes. Behind him, he heard the footsteps come to a halt, but he didn’t turn around and face them. Perhaps it was childish, but he didn’t see why he should have to.

“I’m leaving,” said Remus.

“Good luck on your journey,” said James, stiffly.

Remus made a small sound that reminded James of nothing so much as a snarl. “You could still salvage this, you know,” he said then, and

caused an old resentment to rise in James. Counselor to all of us, until the bitter end. “I know that Harry hates you right now, but if you visit him, or write him a letter if you don’t feel up to doing that—”

“Stop it, Remus.”

There was a little silence, and then Remus’s voice again, clipped and soft and futile. “You’d rather sink with your stupid pride than throw a lifeline out to shore? Harry would grasp it. You know he would.”

James’s hands tightened on the article, crumpling it. Good. I don’t want to look at it any more. “It’s not that simple, Remus.”

His old friend’s voice went cold. “It can be, or I would never have been able to reconcile with Peter. And I wish you’d had the good sense to do the same thing with the people you really need to. Goodbye, James. Remember that if you send a letter to me or Peter at the Sanctuary, it will take some time to reach us.” He turned around, snapping something at the trunk, and James heard him leave. He sat in silence, the wards tingling around him, until he felt Remus step outside them and Apparate.

Then, biting his lip, James picked up a quill and began his response to Harry.

It would have been simple, after all, if he didn’t have a wife and another son who might be hurt by this. But he did, and that meant there was only one answer he could give to Harry’s blatant threat.

He wrote with a heavy heart.

When did everything go so wrong? When did Harry start feeling more loyalty to one of his professors than his own blood family, even when that professor embarrassed his father so horribly?

“Calming Potions,” announced Dumbledore with a degree of satisfaction, his eyes shining at them over his half-glasses. “We will begin working on the variations of the simple calming draught today, and work our way up to ever more complex potions. Please open your books to page 437.”

Harry dutifully did so, listening in silence to the excited chattering of the Gryffindors. They had been much more cheerful ever since Dumbledore took over Snape's classes. And Harry had to admit that Dumbledore wasn't half a bad teacher. He did explain things more slowly than Snape, and he could give more encouragement, even though he didn't possess half of Snape's theoretical knowledge.

But Harry could not forget what else Dumbledore was, not when he could feel the current of compulsion that soothed a fight beginning to erupt between Blaise and Dean Thomas, or when the encouragements to Neville had an extra edge to them. He kept his eyes down, and worked hard, and tried not to show how bored he was. Snape had had him on seventh-year work, and despite the lifetime of practice Harry had in pretending to be less competent than he really was, it was surprisingly hard to go back to fourth-year brewing.

He stood up to fetch the violet petals and other ingredients they would need, and Draco caught his arm. Harry glanced at him inquiringly. Snape had made them partners a few days before his arrest, and Dumbledore had seen no reason to change the arrangement.

Now, Harry almost wished he had. Draco's eyes were gleaming with the bright fever they'd taken on in the past few days, and the black-and-silver web around him pulsed, visible even when Harry wasn't looking for it.

"Harry," Draco whispered. "Can you fetch me some powdered bicorn horn and sphinx claws, too?"

Harry recognized those ingredients at once. They were for Draco's mysterious potion, about which he still refused to say much, but which he had dedicated himself to passionately.

"Draco—" Harry whispered.

"It's all right," said Draco. "I think I can get one of the preliminary steps in the potion done today. A lot of the ingredients are the same

as a calming draught.” He paused and stared challengingly at Harry. “Unless you’re not going to help me any more, of course, and I have to fetch them myself.”

Harry rolled his eyes and went to get what Draco had asked him for. Arguing with Draco had become more useless than ever.

Harry had, tentatively, touched the web, especially when they were in the library and Draco was lost in yet another book on Julia Malfoy, while Harry researched house elves’ webs and how he might break them. The web did not react well to any attempt to touch it, it seemed. It simply writhed—once Harry had thought it even hissed—and slithered closer to Draco, wrapping his head and arms and shoulders. Harry could see the tendrils where it had sunk into his brain, and try as he might, he could think of no way to detach it without ripping out half Draco’s sanity along with it. He was not about to risk that. He’d been through enough of that himself, after the Chamber.

He was at his wits’ end to do anything other than help Draco complete the potion as fast as possible. The web seemed tied to that. It certainly grew brighter whenever he talked about it.

Complete the potion, Harry thought as he balanced all the necessary ingredients on a tray, not for the first time, and the web should let him go.

He was reminded, also not for the first time, that that might be as much wishful thinking as honest hope.

He settled down beside Draco again just as Dumbledore swept past their table. Harry cast a wandless glamour to shield the extra ingredients from the Headmaster’s sight, and looked up with a small smile.

“You boys have everything you need already?” The Headmaster looked the very picture of kindness. Harry just watched him, even as Draco nodded and smiled and put on the sweet, innocent mask he’d grown expert at adopting of late, whenever someone who wasn’t Harry questioned him about his life.

“Yes, thank you, sir,” said Draco, and flicked his wand at the cauldron, causing the fire beneath it to light. Dumbledore bobbed his head pleasantly at them both, and then carried on around the room, pausing to give Neville a gentle scolding on the color of his calming potion.

“Calming potions,” Draco muttered beneath his breath, flicking the powdered bicorn horn into the cauldron with precise movements of his fingers. “At our age. Honestly.”

“Is that why we’re not making one?” Harry muttered, even as he used the mortar and pestle to grind the violet petals down into a fine paste. He knew what he needed to do as well as Draco did. He had listened, not merely heard, while Draco chattered on and on about this step of the potion.

“Not just that,” said Draco seriously. He spoke with his attention on the cauldron as the potion turned an odd orange color, and Harry thought that might have been the reason he said what he did, not realizing what had just slipped out. “So that I can become my father’s magical heir, too. Or at least magical heir to a member of my family.” He flashed Harry a hard smile. “I think that’s a very good reason.”

Harry blinked and clenched his hands briefly together. Research on Julia Malfoy, and this potion, which he’s told me he’ll divide into two equal portions, one heavy and thick, one light and airy. I should have known. “Draco,” he said quietly. “Are you trying to call her ghost to you?”

Draco stiffened abruptly, and Harry saw the web around him blaze so brightly that someone else should surely have seen it. Then he whipped around and faced Harry, his face unfriendly.

“What do you know about it?” he whispered.

“Enough to know that necromancy is dangerous unless you make the sacrifices,” said Harry, and filtered the violet petals into the potion in five equal pinches. “And you haven’t.” He felt his heart beating faster, and for a moment, everything in the class blurred but Draco’s face.

“And I don’t think that you have any intention of making them either, do you?”

Draco snorted at him, and the web calmed a bit. “I don’t need to,” he retorted haughtily. “Not if I can finish the potion by Halloween. That’s the night ghosts walk in full strength. She’ll hear and heed my call. She’s got to. I’m a Malfoy.”

Harry thought privately that the ghost of Julia Malfoy did not need to do anything. She had struck him through the reading he himself had done as an independent woman, quietly used to getting her own way, but used to it nonetheless. If Draco called her, and especially on a night when the barrier between the ordinary wizarding world and the world of necromancy was at its weakest, then he would get a response, but it might not be the one he wanted.

“Draco—” he began, even as he shredded the sphinx claws.

Draco reached over and closed one hand on his hand. Harry blinked. Draco hadn’t touched him in a day or two, and Harry was startled and worried to see that it wasn’t just the gleam in his eyes that was feverish. His skin felt hot as well.

“Harry,” Draco whispered, “please, will you just support me until Halloween? Only until then, I promise. I need your help with the potion. Well, I don’t, I mean, I could do it on my own, but I want your help.” He drew in a deep breath. “I don’t think there’s anyone else I would trust with as much of this as I have you. You’re the only one I could trust, the only one I could ever trust.”

Put like that, Harry thought, how could I refuse? He was still trying to make it up to Draco for his years of neglect and simply scooping the insides out of their friendship without giving anything back in return. What Draco wanted of him was simple enough, and it meant that Harry could watch his web and his fever and see if either of them worsened. Perhaps he would even find a way to loosen the web, if he really searched.

And it would give him something else to worry about other than Snape, and the reply from his father, which was due tomorrow at the latest.

He nodded, firmly. Draco's smile became sweet, and his hold loosened. "Thanks," he whispered. "Thanks, Harry. Really."

"I want you to sleep tonight, though," Harry told him. "You look as though you're getting sick, and you might make a mistake in the potion."

Draco blinked, then rubbed the side of his face. "You're right," he said. "I was up late last night studying, and the night before that. I can't collapse and just exhaust myself before I have to summon her. And someone else might notice if I get too run-down. Thanks, Harry."

Harry relaxed his shoulders. He would have to wait and see if his suggestion actually worked before he trusted to it, but at least Draco sounded sincere right now, and Harry would persuade him again at bedtime, if necessary.

Draco looked back at the potion, now a slow blue, and frowned abruptly. "Bother," he said. "I forgot, we'll need more powdered bicorn horn than that."

Harry started to stand, but Draco shook his head at him. "No, no, I'll go get it," he said, and slid out from behind Harry. His hand came down to squeeze on Harry's shoulder, hard, once, and then he hurried into the storeroom.

Harry added half the sphinx claws and stirred counterclockwise five times. Dumbledore swept past again, but just winked at him. Harry ignored the Headmaster.

He became aware of a quiet purring sound.

Harry squinted down with one eye, and saw an old-looking book poking out of the top of Draco's bag. He recognized it at once, though he still didn't know the title. It was the book Draco was always reading

outside the library, the one that seemed to have given him the idea of the potion in the first place, and which he wouldn't let Harry see.

Now, Harry could reach down, shift the book a bit, and read the title, if he wanted.

Snape had to have given it to him, Harry thought, staring fixedly at the book, even as he went back to shredding the sphinx claws. His parents might have, but I don't think that he had it those first few days back at school, and they certainly didn't send it by owl. And it feels magical.

For a moment, Harry suffered a more profound doubt in Snape than he had known in years. Could the book have put the compulsion on Draco?

Then he shook his head. No. Snape wouldn't do that. He wouldn't take away someone's freedom like that. He was concerned, just like me, that Draco wasn't getting enough independence. It would be counterproductive to put that kind of compulsion on him when he wanted Draco to be his own person. The web has to come from something else—or, if it's from the book, Snape can't have known this would be the result.

He wouldn't do something like that.

"Here we are, Harry!"

Harry glanced up with a smile. "Just in time," he said, as Draco hurried up with the powdered bicorn horn. He felt calm and virtuous, even with the sight of the crawling black-silver strands on his friend's head. He had not looked at the book. He would not pry into Draco's secret until Draco was ready to tell him. "Add three pinches to the cauldron, will you?"

Grinning, Draco did so.

Harry eyed his web sideways as he stirred the potion again. They were going to complete it by the end of the class, and they could

safely bottle it and store it somewhere until it was needed in the full potion.

I'll stand by him. I'll make sure he's free. He has to be. His life and his freedom are just as important as anyone else's.

"Potter! Stay a moment."

Harry halted with a wince, but turned around. Moody had just showed them the Unforgivable Curses in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry was feeling a bit sick, and he had watched even Zacharias Smith look unwillingly impressed. Harry wished he could stop thinking about the Killing Curse slamming into his forehead and Connor's that long-ago Halloween night, as he had seen it in a certain Pensieve, and condemning them both to this strange life.

Besides, this was the day that his father's reply was supposed to arrive, if he was really dropping the charges against Snape. Harry wondered if, by this time tomorrow, every one would be looking at him in pity and wonder and scorn—the boy who was neglected by his own father, the boy who was jealous of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Draco lingered for a moment, too, but Harry shook his head and whispered, "Do you know, I think that a spell called the Soul Strength Spell might help in detecting any sympathy-song between your soul and Julia's."

Draco's eyes brightened, and he patted Harry's shoulder comfortingly and rushed away. Harry took a deep breath and turned around to face his Professor, who limped towards him with steady motions of his wooden leg. He handled it so well that Harry could sometimes almost forget it was there, rather like he tended to forget Scrimgeour's limp when he was faced with the man.

Moody's face had become easier to look at—though easiest of all when his gaze was spread out over a whole classroom of students, and not just focused intently on Harry. Harry watched a point just above the normal eye, where the magical one didn't tend to roll, relaxed, and waited.

“Wanted to ask you something about the Killing Curse,” Moody grunted, scratching the side of his scarred nose. “Didn’t want to make a big deal of it in class, you understand, with everyone watching, but thought it worthwhile to ask you in private.”

Harry nodded once, a light, tense bob of his head. He didn’t know why he continued to be uneasy around this man. Moody had done nothing to hurt him, Rosier’s warning notwithstanding. The silver gleam of the collar about his neck reminded Harry of the Hounds now and then, but Moody had been loud in his denunciations of the Minister for having Snape arrested. He was just an intimidating teacher, that was all, not quite as good as Remus, but good enough.

It’s as though Regulus’s dislike of him passed into me, since he can’t be here anymore, Harry thought, with a pang of disquiet, and reached out after his friend again. Still nothing. There had been nothing but silence in that part of his brain ever since the autumnal equinox.

“—brother survived it,” Moody said, and Harry realized, with a start, that he hadn’t been paying attention, one of the first times that had ever happened. When the ex-Auror spoke, most of his students listened. “I just wondered if you could remember anything about that night? If you yourself know the source of your brother’s exceptionalism?”

Harry fought the urge to hiss at the man. All his old protective instincts were up and barking, but he restrained them. Moody was not threatening Connor. He was just asking a question, a question that most people must have wondered about at one time or another, but would have directed to Connor himself or kept quiet about. It was still there behind their eyes, though. How’d you do it?

“No, sir,” said Harry, letting a regretful frown pull at the corners of his lips. “I was only a baby, remember, and I wasn’t the one who survived the Killing Curse.” He kept his eyes firmly on Moody’s. Let them flicker off to the side, even a little, and Moody might know he was lying. “You could ask Connor, though. He might know better than me. Surviving that has got to leave a mark on someone.”

Moody gave him a wolfs-head grin. "Funny thing, Potter. I did ask him about that when I taught his class the other day. And he went white as a ghost and stammered out some nonsense about not being able to see right. Do you know what he might mean?" Moody leaned forward in interest.

Harry let his eyes widen in feigned surprise, while his mind sped. He would bet Connor had been on the verge of blurting out the memory in the Pensieve, before he remembered that they were supposed to keep it quiet for now, and hadn't recovered himself in time. Well, there was no reason that he should do so. Connor wasn't trained in lying and concealment as Harry was.

"Well, our cots were below the level of the door, you know," said Harry. "And when Voldemort—"

"Strange, that you refer to him by his name," Moody said softly.

Harry cocked his head. "I think it's silly to call him You-Know-Who, sir."

"Why?" Moody bounced his wand on his palm, both eyes fixed on Harry now. Harry was just glad that the magical eye couldn't read thoughts. He armed his Occlumency shields anyway, though.

Harry shrugged. "It's a silly title. If there was some better one, then I'd take it. But Voldemort is the name he chose, so I don't see why I can't call him by that." He bit his lip on the next words: that he could also call him Tom Riddle, and if anyone in the world had the right to call him that, it would be Harry or Connor, whose heads he'd sequestered himself in. But he didn't see the point in referring to it.

Moody studied him for a moment, then gave a grunt and a nod so abrupt he looked like a heron spearing a fish. "Continue."

"When Voldemort came in," Harry continued, "he would have shot the spell at Connor from above. Maybe he can remember part of it, but he couldn't see him fire the curse." He let a bit of envy creep into his voice. Might as well practice, if that article is going to be published

after all. "That's different, though. He never told me that he might be able to remember any of it."

Moody grunted again, and tapped his wand against his lips. Harry tried not to think about all the incidents that might result from that, and waited.

Moody at last fixed him with both eyes, and said, "Do you ever wonder about freedom, Potter?"

"Freedom, sir?"

"Freedom." Moody nodded firmly. "Freedom to just—do what you like. You're very powerful." Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes over the way Moody sounded on those words. Impressed, just like anyone else. Isn't there anyone who can see that magic doesn't prevent someone from being a bad friend, the way I have been with Draco? "Have you ever thought of letting go all restraints and doing just what you like? That's how a lot of Dark wizards and witches get started, you know."

Harry shuddered at the mere idea. "No," he said.

"No?" Moody used a rising inflection. Harry narrowed his eyes. He's surprised. How can he be surprised, after he's seen me in class day in and day out?

"No, sir," he said firmly. "I'd hurt too many other people. And that matters to me. That matters a lot." He hesitated, but he didn't know the purpose of this conversation. On the off chance that Moody was trying to get him to bare his soul, Harry still had no desire to bare his soul to him. "I don't want to do that," he finished, simply, and shifted his feet as he glanced at the door. "Is that all, sir? Only, I'm supposed to go study for Transfiguration, and—"

"Go, go," said Moody, with a dismissive wave of his hand, and Harry hurried off, shaking his head. Strange. I don't know what he thinks he'll catch me in. Does he think I would suddenly blurt out some desire to be a Dark wizard, right in front of him? That would be a death wish, with how much he hates Dark magic.

Harry did glance back, once, to see Moody still regarding him, not even his magical eye rolling towards his lesson plan for his next class.

Harry shivered and all but ran out. He probably does think I'm going Dark. Honestly. Absolute power does not always corrupt absolutely—and I'm very far from absolutely powerful, anyway. Dumbledore and Voldemort are still stronger than I am. I wish everyone would stop acting as though my magic matters so much. What matters is what I do with it.

Harry saw the post owls coming, and held his breath. Four, and one of them broke off over the Gryffindor table and fluttered down to Neville, doubtless bringing him a gift from his grandmother.

The other three came to the Slytherin table, one of them landing beside Draco. The other two extended their legs to Harry, one already snatching food impatiently from his plate, as though it had had a long flight.

Harry took both letters, but made himself put off the one that, by the seal on the envelope, was from Lux Aeterna. His hands were not shaking as he opened the one from Snape. They weren't.

Harry:

I wanted to apologize for my behavior lately.

Harry blinked and peered hard at the letter. Nothing happened to the words. "Aspectus Lyncis," he muttered, just in case, but no trace of a glamour sprang into existence on the paper.

It seemed that it really was Snape writing this. Harry shook his head in wonder and continued.

I have had a friend recommend Slytherin behavior to me, and I intend to follow it. My trial is slated for December 21st, the day of longest darkness. I suspect that someone is making a point.

You are to bear up and keep your strength ready until that day. It may be that you will be called as a witness, or may volunteer as one.

Keep a watch over Draco. I have noticed of late that his behavior has altered. I will write to him with my concerns, but I am not sure they will make much impression on him.

Remember that I will not be kind if you have sacrificed something irreplaceable in a mad plan to free me.

Severus Snape.

Harry closed his eyes, took a long breath, thought, Let us see what I have sacrificed, then, and opened the letter from James.

It was short. It did not have to be long.

Harry:

I am dropping the charges against Snivellus, at your request.

Your loving father,

James.

Harry couldn't restrain a whoop of triumph, one that pulled even Draco's attention from his own letter, which looked to be from Snape. "What's that?" he asked, and snatched the parchment even before Harry could hold it out. He looked up, eyes wide with surprise, a moment later.

"What did you do?" he demanded of Harry.

Harry waved a hand. "Who cares? It won't happen now." He could feel the world opening out before him for the first time in a week. He still didn't have Snape free, that was true, but he had him one step closer to it. Only the charges from the Minister remained now, and Harry would wait a short time still to see if Scrimgeour might be able to do something; he didn't even know if Tonks had spoken to him yet. Then he would put any number of plans he had into motion.

“Let me see that,” Millicent insisted, and took James’s parchment from Draco. She reacted with her own whoop, and from there the letter had to go to Pansy, and Blaise and Vince demanded to know what was up, and the parchment passed down most of the Slytherin table.

Millicent pounded Harry on the back, hard enough to make him gasp and choke. “I don’t know what you did, Potter,” she said, eyes shining fiercely, “but it was worth it, whatever it was.” She grinned at Pansy. “I think that someone might just happen to know where some butterbeer is, and if so, we’re celebrating tonight!”

It was, Harry thought, his heart singing. It was worth it entirely. He caught his brother’s anxious eye from across the room and smiled at him. Connor relaxed with a loud sigh that caught Hermione’s attention. Unsure how much Connor might have told her, Harry looked away.

Since I’ve lost so many rounds lately, it feels good to win one.

As if mocking that thought, the black-and-silver web on Draco winked malevolently at him.

Harry narrowed his eyes at it. I’m going to get rid of you, too, see if I don’t.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Dancers In the Light

“You’re still taking a risk.”

Rufus stifled the impulse to snap at Kingsley as he settled the dueling bracelets into place about his wrists. “Yes, I know that very well,” he said, rather than the insult he’d been thinking of. He was almost—almost—sure that Albus Dumbledore had approached Kingsley and inducted him into the Order of the Phoenix, rather than Kingsley seeking Dumbledore’s approval. Nevertheless, he could not forget that one of his Aurors was working for a Light Lord who wanted nothing so much as to muck around in the Ministry. “But it’s a risk I chose to take.” He clasped the dueling collar into place and glanced at the younger wizard over his shoulder, waiting.

Kingsley flushed, though his skin was dark enough that it was hard to see. “I—yes, sir, I see that.”

“Good,” said Rufus mildly, and then closed his eyes to feel the buzz of the collar’s magic surrounding him. This was nothing like those foul things Gorgon and Morologus had worn, and which it had nearly cost the Hounds’ sanity to remove. This collar merely recorded that he had chosen to enter the dance of his own free will, and that he remained within its boundaries of his own free will. Despite the consequences for violating the ritual if the loser attempted to meddle in politics before the year’s term was up, the heart of this was not about compulsion, a tool of the Dark, but choice. “Come, then.”

He turned and swept out of his office, his wand riding light in his pocket, the bracelets and the collar equally light on his wrists and neck. He limped, as always, but that did not mock or mar his stride. Kingsley followed behind him, grumbling. Young Percy already waited in the dueling courtyard, a specially-equipped area on the first floor.

Rufus felt his Aurors’ gazes trailing him as he walked between their desks, and heard many murmurs of, “Good luck, sir.” He nodded back with bare tilts of his head, enjoying the smooth pyrite of the collar as it caught him up now and then. His Aurors knew that he was fighting a duel with Augustus Starrise, and some of what it meant. None of them knew of the vote of no confidence that Amelia intended

to introduce into the Wizengamot today. She had decided to wait until after the duel, and nothing Rufus could say would sway her. He had shrugged and given in at last. She was still his superior.

But not now, Rufus thought, and intense delight surged through him. He was on his way into one of the oldest testing places of all, the dueling courtyard, and what occurred there was between him and his opponent. And he was going about it properly, with the bracelets and the collar and the knowledge of the spells he would use all close to him as his own skin.

Rufus Scrimgeour had declared himself for the Light when he was twelve years old. Many people had thought him mad, to declare so young, and when he was in Slytherin, not least.

Rufus had never regretted it. Not for a day. The Light was the best way of doing things, when it was used right. Or perhaps it was more correct to say that it contained the best way of doing things. Better to let people make their own choices, within boundaries that prevented them from trampling on other people's choices, and with absolute honesty, and in harmony if at all possible. Rufus had looked between Light and Dark that long-ago day, and chosen the path he thought would let him best accomplish all those things.

White trails of racing radiance began to coalesce behind his eyelids. He smiled. He kept his eyes shut, and the radiance shot ahead of him, leading him a smooth path so that he didn't trip or stumble.

All the wizards and witches he passed, going about the ordinary everyday business of the Ministry, fell silent when they saw him, and many bowed and stepped out of the way. Rufus could see that, though he still kept his eyes shut. A second kind of sight was blooming above the white trail, the Light showing him the way.

Those who worked and lived within the Light had to use their eyes, in more ways than one.

Rufus opened his at last when he climbed out of the lift and turned in the direction of the dueling courtyard. He could feel his opponent already waiting for him, hot as a summer breeze and as patient.

Augustus Starrise had always been patient, at least since a certain night almost exactly thirteen years ago.

Rufus stepped through what looked like an ordinary door, Kingsley close behind him, and emerged into the courtyard. It could not have been outside, but it appeared to be so. Light filled it from wall to wall. Vines climbed those walls, which were made of closely-fitted white stone, and raised enormous blossoms, the shape of trumpets and near the size of them, to the sky. The blossoms themselves were golden, streaked with brighter, paler streaks that reminded Rufus of the colors he saw when he pressed his hand over his tightly-shut eyes. The grass was smooth and soft as a child's blanket, and a very deep shade, closer to purple than green.

Rufus ran his eyes over the garden before he turned to acknowledge Augustus. Yes, as he watched, starburst after starburst opened above the walls, and split into pairs of white birds, large as peacocks and having something of the phoenix about them, though they shed no heat. The birds perched on the walls and stared intently. One of every pair stared at him, and one at Augustus.

These were the ritual's witnesses, come to make sure the dance was performed perfectly. If one of the wizards participating in it did break his word not to meddle in politics for a year after he had lost the duel, then the birds would coalesce into one creature far greater and come at noon to tear one of his limbs off.

Rufus simply breathed for a time, nearly dazed and overwhelmed by the presence of Light magic, thick and pure and strong. He thought he would have needed more time to recover, but his exposure to young Harry had helped him overcome the swimming sensation that was usually the result of standing in the middle of so much power.

That, he thought as he finally turned to face his opponent and bow, and his exposure to a young man named Tom Riddle, three years ahead of him in Slytherin, who had radiated Lord-level power all the damn time, and had been a minor factor in Rufus's declaring himself for the Light.

Augustus bowed back, and then stood facing him, features calm and expressionless as iron. Rufus traced one hand over his arm, following the line of the scar the war wizard had given him the last time they duelled.

That had been right after the fall of Voldemort at the hands of Connor Potter, when Augustus had come seeking the name of the Auror who had been with his twin sister, Alba Starrise, on the night of her suicide, and failed to prevent that suicide.

Rufus kept his eyes on Augustus's face, but he saw, how he saw, other eyes, locked staring and dead above a protruding tongue and broken neck. Her golden hair had fanned out about her head, pale and perfect and lovely. Alba Starrise, last victim of Voldemort before he fell. He'd left her alone for three minutes while he went to fetch her a cup of tea, and she had managed to hang herself anyway.

Rufus knew he was lucky to have escaped with the scar alone. That had been because he was the Auror who failed Alba, not the one who had actually done—whatever it was the Death Eaters did to her. Augustus had never learned the names or identities of those Death Eaters, or he would not have hesitated, with the mood he was in after losing his twin, to call down the *Caerimonia Inrevocabilis*, the highest and sternest of the old Light justice rituals.

That particular ritual claimed the life of the one who invoked it, but it also claimed, without exception, the life or lives of the enemies he had called it against. Rufus had read of it. He had never seen it used.

He would have, that day.

Calm, patient, pale, Augustus Starrise waited for him to finish his inspection. Then he inclined his head.

"Old friend," he said. "Where are your witnesses?"

Rufus motioned back with his head, to Kingsley. "One behind me," he said, and heard the rustle as all the birds leaned forward intently. "Kingsley Shacklebolt is an Auror and a servant of a Light Lord." He

felt Kingsley start, badly, and was glad that he had learned to keep a smile off his face. "Does he pass your inspection?"

"Rather well," said Augustus. "This is the first of my witnesses." He reached out a hand, and summoned forth a pale young man who had been standing in the shadow of the trumpet-shaped flowers. Bells tinkled softly in one braid of his hair as he moved. Augustus smiled sharply. "This is my nephew and heir, Pharos Starrise. Does he pass your inspection?"

Rufus studied Pharos, and had to admire Augustus's cunning. This was Alba's son; every line of his face proclaimed it. "Rather well," he admitted. "My second witness is Percy Weasley."

Percy had been huddling in a corner of the courtyard as if he hoped he wouldn't be noticed. Now, he shuffled forward, head lowered. He flinched when Augustus looked towards him.

"Percy is the acknowledged son of a Light pureblood family," Rufus said calmly. "Does he pass your inspection?"

Augustus nodded. "I know the Weasleys," he said. "I would not have expected to find one of them working under you, Rufus."

Rufus simply arched his brows and said nothing. Technically, Percy wasn't supposed to be working for him, but it would take several committed wizards working through a mountain of paperwork to figure that out. "Where is your second witness, Augustus?"

Augustus bared his teeth in a smile that made him look rather like Lucius Malfoy. Rufus amused himself by considering how both of them, Light wizard and Dark, would hate to be told that. "She is all around us," he said. "I dedicate this duel to my sister Alba, Rufus, whom I loved and whom you failed. She is with me today in our shared blood, in the blood of her son, Pharos, and in the Light that was her true and natural home."

Rufus narrowed his eyes before he could stop himself, and felt the bracelets jangle on his wrists as his weight shifted. Low blow, Augustus. I would have given my left arm to stop her, and you know it.

Augustus smiled genially. "The terms of the Sunset Accords are strict," he said, beginning his part of the ritual. The birds leaned forward even further. "If I lose, I must swear to withdraw all my support from Cornelius Fudge at once, and to refrain from the persecution of Dark wizards, for one year. If you lose, Rufus, you must swear to abstain from any politics, even ones in the office, and perform only your duties as Head of the Auror Office, for one year." He tossed his head, and made his long hair, thick with bells, ring. "Your last chance to back out, Rufus."

"I do not back away," said Rufus, giving the correct response. "In sunlight I swore this. In the Light I will finish it." He drew his wand.

Augustus made a low, eager sound, like a hound straining forward against the edge of a leash, and pulled out his own wand, made of some white wood that Rufus could not immediately identify. "It begins, then," he said.

"It does," said Rufus, and bowed. He felt Kingsley and Percy tensing behind him, and Pharos shifted a bit at his uncle's side. Augustus's eyes never moved from his. They were trained, confident, full of pride. He was the better dueler. The other three there—the other four, Rufus corrected himself—at least suspected it.

He and Augustus knew it.

That was why Rufus had chosen as he had. The bracelets around his wrists warmed, and then began to shed small sparkles of light. If Augustus had been looking, he would have seen and understood the message contained in those ornaments. They were not the small and flexible, nearly weightless, things that a dueler who expected to have to move fast would wear. They were heavy, made of polished platinum, and they shone like water touched by fire as Rufus gathered himself and they waited for the duel to begin.

Rufus would not use spells to incapacitate or wound. He was of the Light, and he would use a spell based on compassion and honesty. When he could, he preferred that definition of the Light. One might

have to lie to get things done in the Ministry, but the truth was always better.

The birds on the walls lifted their wings and brought them down, in a rippling wave motion that traveled all around the garden.

Augustus whispered, “Diffindo.”

The spell went for Rufus’s wand hand. Of course it did. Rufus made no motion to defend himself as a long cut opened down the center of his palm, a thin line of blood that nevertheless hurt like blazes. He saw Augustus’s eyes widen in surprise.

Then he looked at the bracelets, finally, as they began to shine too brightly to be ignored, and the widening of his eyes changed to one of comprehension.

It was too late, though. Rufus met his gaze, and smiled, and whispered, “Probo Memoriter Meus.”

The blue web of the spell spun into existence, glowing and radiant. Rufus closed his eyes as it briefly lashed into place about his head, asking permission to extract the memory that he wanted to share. Rufus granted it his permission, and then the light darted away from him. He opened his eyes and watched, calmly, as it showed Augustus Starrise the vision he had to see.

All of them—and that would include the witnesses—were pulled directly into the memory, sharing Rufus’s sensations and emotions as well as the mere sight.

“Might I please have a cup of tea?”

Rufus could feel his heart contract. Alba Starrise’s eyes were horrified, near-broken, and she kept her head bowed, her golden hair falling around her face. He thought he might know what the Death Eaters had done to her, and if he was right—well. No one had ever said that someone need touch a witch to rape her.

“Of course, lady,” he said, the instinctive courtesies of his childhood springing to his lips. He had taken her wand away; there was no way she could hurt herself, and this small, barren green room was cheerless enough without refusing her simple request. “I’ll bring it immediately.”

He left the room with a determined stride, wincing only a little as his bad leg made contact with the ground. Normally he would have sent one of the trainees and stayed with Alba himself, but they were all dealing with the aftermath of the Death Eaters’ latest attack. Voldemort had been in a fine good mood tonight, Rufus thought sourly, almost as though he were preparing something special for the following nights.

They had done well, though. They’d rescued Alba, and several other witches and wizards who had been prisoners of the Death Eaters for days. Now the hard work could really begin: the healing of the memories that had made Alba Starrise’s eyes look like that.

It was the work of three minutes for Rufus to find a cup, to heat the tea with a quickly murmured spell, and to return to the room.

And it had been the work of three minutes for Alba Starrise to string one of the banners congratulating some past Auror hero around her neck, tie one end to a ceiling beam and another around her neck, climb up on the low bed where she’d been sitting, and jump off.

Rufus knew that he didn’t hear her neck break, but he thought he could hear it all the same, echoing and re-echoing in his ears like the sound of his own guilt, or the teacup shattering on the floor. He stared at her, and stared. It was long moments before one of the other Aurors found him and led him away, a few instants more before someone thought to sever the banner with a hex and levitate Alba’s body gently to the ground.

Rufus had gone straight back out to hunt Death Eaters, gripped in the fury of his rage and his helplessness. When Voldemort fell before the Boy-Who-Lived the next night, he was not sure if he was relieved or not. Yes, the Dark Lord and his evil were gone from the world, but Rufus did not feel that justice for Alba Starrise was done.

He learned, slowly and painfully, over the next few years, that there was little justice one could do for the dead.

Rufus blinked his eyes and stepped back slightly as the memory came to an end. "Little justice for the dead," he whispered, so as to echo the thought aloud, and lifted his eyes back to Augustus Starrise's. "But much justice for the living. So long as someone is alive, and I can help, I will do justice by them."

The Light wizard stared at him, eyes wide and breath coming in heaves. The white birds on the walls were utterly still and silent.

"Diffindo," Augustus Starrise said again, but the spell was weak and almost without strength. Rufus bore the small cut across his hand, and spoke his second spell gently.

"Petrificus Totalus."

Augustus Starrise, still weak from seeing his beloved sister's death play out before him, in such a fashion that he could not doubt the wizard he had blamed for it felt his failure keen as a dagger to the heart, fell to the ground.

Rufus came forward and knelt down in front of Augustus, as the white birds raised their wings and then lowered them again. "I am sorry, Augustus, that I had to make you see that," he whispered. "But it is done now." He moved back into the words of the ritual. "Under the Light, by the Light, in the Light, may our dances be concluded. First step to you, Augustus Starrise, and last to me." He paused and released the spell, waiting for Augustus to give the token protest he still could at this stage, even if just with his eyes, but nothing happened. Rufus nodded. "You must refrain from supporting Cornelius Fudge and persecuting Dark wizards for a year, as you swore.

"Go in peace," he added, and turned away.

He had nearly reached the end of the garden when Augustus's voice whispered behind him, "Rufus."

“Yes?” Rufus turned. The heavy bracelets still shone, sunlight-like, on his wrists, and Augustus winced. Rufus shook his sleeves over them to dim them as much as possible. They had proclaimed his pure intentions, but the duel was over now and they might rest.

“Do you know who they were?” Augustus whispered. “Who the Death Eaters were that did that to my sister?”

Rufus closed his eyes. He has not learned after all, then. “No,” he said quietly. “And I would not let you know their names even if I uncovered evidence of them, Augustus.”

“What?” The Starrise wizard’s voice was anguished. The bells in his hair clashed and jangled as he scrambled to his feet. “How can you say that? You felt pain when she died, I know you did—“

“Because,” Rufus cut in, “you would kill them without a trial. I want to bring them to trial, if I can ever catch them.” He pinned Augustus with a harsh gaze. “In such a way as leaves both them alive, to face justice, and you alive, to see it.”

“But I could invoke—“

“It’s been thirteen years, Augustus.” Rufus made his voice as gentle as possible, but he thought some of his disgust got across anyway, from the way Augustus promptly shut his mouth. “Shouldn’t you let her rest?”

He turned away before he heard anything else, and made his way out of the dueling courtyard, back towards the lift. The white birds were already gone, and the Light magic was fading, leaving him in the ordinary, complicated, mixed and muted world, once again.

Where I’ve won a duel, and Amelia will soon announce that the Wizengamot will consider a vote of no confidence against Fudge.

He still felt hollow, though, as if he had descended a mountain, and inside his head there was a roaring quiet.

“Harry? Come on, Harry.”

Harry rolled his eyes and let Draco drag him away from the celebrating Slytherins by one hand. At least he'd waited until an hour into the party. That meant that the focus was now on who could balance the most empty butterbeer bottles on her head and not on the "Boy Who Saved Snape," as they insisted on calling him. He could leave with just a few disappointed looks from Millicent. And Pansy. Oh, and Blaise. And, well, a few of the fifth-years and sixth-years, too. Harry ducked his head.

Stop looking at me, he tried to shout at them silently, but just then there came a crash of breaking glass, and all focus went back where it should be. Harry let out a little sigh of relief and shut the door of the fourth-year boys' room behind them, then turned to look inquiringly at Draco.

Draco was already digging the potions book out of his trunk. He turned to face Harry, and his eyes were solemn.

"I decided to tell you more," he said. "You've been a really good help to me, Harry, and you haven't asked silly questions. You should get to know."

Harry bowed his head, feeling honored. "All right, Draco. What did you want to tell me?"

Draco bounced onto his bed and opened the potions book. At once, a tingling wave of magic flooded the room, and Harry saw the web on Draco's head swell and pulse like a spider eating flies. He squinted at it. Yes, the book caused the web, I'd swear it. And it probably didn't show up before now because Draco wasn't willingly telling me what he'd done. Now that he is, the book's magic is interacting with the web in some way.

I don't like that web. I really don't like it.

"See," Draco was saying, pointing to a recipe that Harry had to crawl onto the bed behind him to see, "this is the recipe that I wanted. It shows me how to call up an ancestor's ghost and become a magical

heir of him or her, as long as our souls are in sympathy and I can inherit the magic.” He beamed at Harry. “That means that Father would acknowledge me as a Malfoy magical heir, too.”

Harry fought to keep from snarling at the page. He didn’t like the book, either, now that he’d almost confirmed his suspicion that it had put the web on Draco. He was still sure that Snape couldn’t have known what it did, though, because Snape wouldn’t put webs on people. He’d known slavery too intimately. But he had a lot to answer for, just giving this book to Draco when he asked.

“Why is it so important that you be a magical heir?” Harry asked, reaching out to trace one line of the recipe with his finger. Now that he could see the full complexity of the thing, and what kind of research it would require, Draco’s quickness in getting ready to brew the potion astonished him anew. Draco was not often that...dedicated. Intelligent, yes, passionate, yes, but not this driven.

The page trembled before his finger touched it, and seemed as if it might turn on its own. Harry jerked his hand back. Draco didn’t seem to notice.

“Because, Harry,” he said softly, his eyes downcast, “I have to be a magical heir to be considered for some of the best advantages in pureblood society. To be a business partner, for example, or to receive some gifts, or to participate in some rituals and meetings. Even the alliance meeting that we had, with you in the Ministry, which the Parkinsons and the Bulstrodes attended? I couldn’t have attended that if someone really wanted to make a fuss about the rules. My father is just always saying that I’ll manifest sympathy with his soul sometime soon, but I’m getting older, and I don’t think I’m his magical heir.” He lifted his eyes, and sought out Harry’s. “Do you understand? This is—this is really important to me. I want to know that I’m not below anyone else. I want to know that I have the power to defend myself if someone attacks me, and to defend the people I care about. I know that you might not get it, because you’re Lord-powerful and always have been, but I really, really want this.” He bowed his head again, and all but huddled around the book. “This is the only chance I can think of.”

“Draco,” Harry whispered, and, tentatively, knowing that Draco might lash out at him again in the mood he was in, put his arms around him. It was easier than he expected, since he was sitting directly behind his friend. Draco turned his head sharply to the side, burrowing into Harry’s chest. Harry tensed, then forced himself to relax, muscle by muscle.

It’s all right that I can’t spring to my feet and move about quickly, he reassured himself. Nothing’s going to attack me here.

He concentrated on pouring strength and comfort down his arms to Draco, without using his magic. Draco kept silent, and so Harry ventured at last, “And you want to be equal to me.”

“Yeah,” Draco whispered. “That’s why I’m really hoping that Julia Malfoy was a Lady, Harry. You shouldn’t always be protecting me. I want to be able to protect you sometimes, too, you know?”

“Oh, Draco,” said Harry, stung by the injustice of that comment. “You have protected me. Last year, when Connor was tearing me apart, and the year before that, when you went with me into the Chamber, and—“

“That’s not enough,” Draco said, with a stubborn tilt to his chin that Harry knew only too well. “I want to be able to at least match you, Harry. Picking up the pieces when you come back broken, or just blacking out in the Chamber and not seeing the whole fight—that’s not enough anymore. I can be with you like that, but not stand with you. I really, really want to fight at your side.”

Harry closed his eyes. Draco was right; he hadn’t considered that angle of it. He’d seen only Draco’s possessiveness, not the fact that Draco had this intense loyalty that could only be eased by the ability to protect someone else. And it was true that he didn’t consider that much. Moving in the midst of his own magic, sheltered and cradled by it, he tended to forget that other wizards couldn’t do everything he could, or he thought he could do it for them. But why shouldn’t they have the ability, not only to make their own decisions, but to enact those decisions?

Harry opened one eye and looked at the pulsing black-silver compulsion again. I can think of one reason why.

But if the compulsion was attached to the damn book, and the damn potion recipe, it should go away when Draco finished the damn potion.

Harry nodded. "I'll help you all I can, Draco," he whispered. "We'll have that potion finished by Halloween, I promise."

Draco gave a sound that might have been a sigh or a sob or even a gasp of happy contentment, and turned fully to face Harry, though he didn't hug him; he kept his arms around the potions book. "Thank you, Harry," he whispered. "Oh, Merlin, I missed you."

Harry opened his mouth to question what that meant, then shut it again. They had been distant from each other—more distant than Draco knew, since there was a lot Harry hadn't been telling him.

Harry did want to be close again, if he could. The sudden rush of longing reminded him of the way he'd felt when he realized the path might be open to a closer relationship with Connor once more.

"I missed you, too," he said.

Draco beamed at him, and, miracle of miracles, for the rest of the evening, was willing to talk professional Quidditch and how dare Professor Flitwick assign so much homework, rather than the damn potion. Harry lay close by his side, and commented back to him, and watched the web twitch and squirm. It seemed to be aware of him now, and to try to avoid his gaze without abandoning its hold on Draco's head and shoulders.

I know what you are, Harry thought, and hoped it was loud enough to be heard. I'm going to tear you apart for messing with my best friend. Harry dreamed.

He knew at once it was a dream, thanks to the odd darkness, and the sharp, clear sounds around him, and the fact that the floor was solid under his—

Feet?

Harry glanced rapidly down at himself, which didn't help, because it was dark. He could tell he was in a different body than the one he was used to, though, something mid-size and four-legged. Luckily, as he crept towards the flickering firelight and the low sound of voices, he walked silently, too.

He froze, bristling, at the edge of the firelight. He recognized one voice. High and cold, Voldemort's tones were impossible to forget.

"Everything is in place, Evan?"

"Yes, my Lord," said the Death Eater, sounding cheerful. "Your return to Britain is awaited with great interest by your loyal subjects, whose ranks are growing by the day. Fenrir Greyback is a—most useful tool."

Harry shifted to the side, trying to see. As if the movement had realigned his perception of the room, he realized abruptly that he was outdoors, and the thick darkness around him came from immense tree trunks. The firelight was burning in a clearing among the trees. Harry's nose twitched at the smells that assaulted it, but he didn't let himself become distracted from the people he could finally locate.

Voldemort's voice was coming from what looked like a tiny throne, cradled in the coils of an enormous snake. Nagini, Harry realized, and stayed quite still, just in case she sensed him.

Could she, though? Harry knew this was a dream, or perhaps a vision.

Harry couldn't see Voldemort himself, and did not try, now that he had seen Nagini. He watched Rosier instead, who stood in front of the throne, just recovering from a sweeping bow.

"And what of those who were once mine?" Voldemort asked, his voice deepening with displeasure. Harry felt his forehead begin to burn. "Those who were once loyal, but have now turned against me?"

"They remain turned, Lord," said Rosier, not looking all that sorry for it. "Alas."

"You displease me," said Voldemort. "Bellatrix!"

A shadow shifted to the side, and the woman Harry had last seen attacking Cho Chang came limping forward. Her right arm was still a ruin, but she held a wand in her left hand.

"Torture him," said Voldemort, sounding bored.

Bellatrix flicked her wand, and Rosier went down under Crucio. He writhed and struggled and gasped with the pain, of course. It took Harry a moment to identify the odd sound in the midst of the gasping, and when he did, he put his ears back.

Rosier was laughing.

"I have passed from the outermost portal," he said, somehow, around the convulsions, "to the shrine where a sin is a prayer. What care though the service be mortal?" He rolled over and lay there, smiling up at Bellatrix, resisting the pain that was clearly running through him. "O our Lady of Torture," he whispered, "what care?"

Bellatrix sneered at him. "You've gone mad, Evan," she said.

"Ah beautiful passionate body," Rosier said, his eyes lingering over her right arm, "that never has ached with a heart!"

Bellatrix glanced at the throne, and then stopped the spell with a jerk. Rosier lay where he was for a moment, trembling, then lifted a hand to wipe the flecks of foam from his lips. Harry did not know if he was relieved or not to see blood among the spittle. "But as sweet as the rind was the core is," he whispered. "We are fain of thee still, we are fain."

"I am sending you to negotiate with the giants, Evan," said Voldemort, sounding almost bored. "See that you do not fail me. They still think that I am their vates, and should listen to you most eagerly."

Rosier inclined his head to Voldemort and stood, recovering faster than Harry thought was normal. He smiled at Bellatrix. "My Lord. Our Lady of Pain," he said. "Until next time." He bowed and limped off into the woods.

"What now, my lord?" Bellatrix's voice was unhappy, resigned, and she sat down in front of the throne, Nagini shifting out of the way with a hiss of protest.

"Now," said Voldemort, "we wait on the sun." He laughed, a sound that Harry had no desire to hear, ever again. "And be glad that a certain troublesome one, bound by blood to you, who was interfering with me and niggling at me, has been laid to rest."

He started laughing again, and the pain in Harry's scar grew so overwhelming that he woke with a gasp.

He found himself still in Draco's bed, fallen asleep half-curved around his friend. He backed away, slowly, and Draco mumbled drowsily and rolled over, clutching the potions book. Harry swallowed, and put a hand to his forehead. It came away covered with blood, of course.

I will send a message to Narcissa, he decided, as he padded off towards the loo. This weekend, we must go to Grimmauld Place, and find Regulus, if we can.

"Will you take us with you?"

Harry jumped and looked down at a movement near his feet. The Many—or one snake of the Many; Harry suspected it was not the same one that had accompanied him so far, since that one had grown tired of the distance from its hive and gone back to the Forest—lifted its head and regarded him with bright eyes. Harry knelt so that it could slither up his arm. The small tongue flicked out and tasted the blood on his scar, a sensation that made Harry shiver.

"If you want to go," he whispered, and set about washing the blood off his forehead. His face was pale and solemn in the mirror, weary and streaked with fatigue and pain.

I could use some help, really. Voldemort coming back to Britain. And the giants! What do I do about them? And what is this nonsense he keeps babbling about the sun?

Harry fought the temptation to put his head against the wall and just keep it there for a while. Sometimes, he wondered why he should have to be the one to do this.

Because there is no one else, he told himself sternly, and straightened. Not yet, at least. Connor might be the prophesied defeater of Voldemort, but no one else is vates, and no one else receives warnings of the Dark Lord like you do.

Grow up, Harry. Stand firm. This is necessary, it always has been, and accepting help isn't the same thing as abandoning your duty.

Harry washed the blood off his scar, brushed his teeth, and went to bed.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Open Unto Me

Minerva closed her eyes and bowed her head. It was the only weakness she would allow herself, these five minutes alone in her office, before she had to stand and go down to face the students in the Great Hall on a Saturday morning near the end of October.

The days of the week and the names of the months had—not mattered to her so much lately. Oh, she had taught the right lesson plans on the right days and known when school started. She had to give herself that much credit. She hadn't been so distracted that she couldn't concentrate.

But things had been disordered ever since three of her pureblood, seventh-year Gryffindors had come to her and confessed that their families were being “recruited” by Fenrir Greyback.

Minerva brushed her hair wearily out of her eyes and stood. The five minutes were almost gone. She could afford to relax now, in one sense, because her students' friends had come flying to her that morning with the news that each one of them was missing from his or her bed. They had brought the notes pinned to their pillows, each addressed to her.

All of them were the same.

I'm sorry.

She had failed—failed to convince them to stay, failed to convince them to bring their families to the sanctuary of Hogwarts, failed to convince them not to retreat and “stay neutral.” Voldemort had slaughtered the supposedly neutral pureblood families in the last war. It was a path that would only lead them to darkness in the end.

She had told them that, and they had seemed to consider it. Minerva had been sure that she was winning all of them slowly back towards the Light, to some consideration beyond what might happen to their families at the next full moon after their first open gesture of defiance.

And now they were gone, and she had failed.

Minerva shook her head and left her office, her steps brisk. Yes, she had failed, just as she had all those years ago when Sirius Black tried to kill Severus. And she would deal with it now as she had then: growing over the wound and going on. There was nothing else to be done. When the music played, she must dance the dance that it signaled, not the one that played in her head.

She had told Albus of her failure already, before going to her office to grieve in private. He had sighed, and patted her head, and murmured some platitude about it not being her fault.

Minerva did not believe that. She was their Head of House, and yet she could not wake them enough from the blind haze of fear that they would see reality

Yet, while she could blame herself and grieve, she saw no point in brooding on it for long. She would face the consequences, and one of them was tightening her watch over her remaining students. If one of them was in trouble, she intended to notice it before it reached the point where they would flee home in sudden cowardice.

She paused when she heard brisk footsteps coming through Hogwarts's front doors. They were too light to be Hagrid's or Sprout's, and there was no one else who had reason to be outside this early. Minerva could feel the temptation to arch her back as she would when she was a cat.

Do they dare to come into Hogwarts itself?

She drew her wand and stepped around the last turn of the stairs, holding it so it was clearly visible before her. Any friend deserved to have the warning, and any enemy would receive a hex full in the face.

A tall, blonde woman halted where she stood, staring at Minerva as if she were a troll. It took Minerva a moment to place where she had seen that smooth, haughty face before.

"Mrs. Malfoy," she said calmly, never lowering her wand. "I believe that the Headmaster asked to be informed when any parent visited school grounds, whether they had come to visit their children or to remove them from Hogwarts." She stepped off the last stair, not letting her eyes stray, either. She remembered Narcissa as an indifferent student of Transfiguration, but there was no telling what she might have learned in the years since she left school, and she had been proficient in Dark Arts, as most Slytherins of that time were.

"Professor McGonagall." Narcissa's voice was also calm, and if she felt the temptation to draw her own wand, it did not show in the way she held herself. "No, I am not here to see Draco, nor to take him home. As a matter of fact, I have suggested a visit to one of my family's properties to Mr. Potter, and he has accepted."

Minerva only narrowed her eyes. "What do you want with Harry?" she asked softly. He was another student she had not paid enough attention to in the past few weeks, involved and bound as she had been in the lives of her three hopeless cases.

"That is none of your concern, surely." Narcissa's eyebrows rose in an expression of polite disbelief. "He is not of your House, and I was not aware that he had formally asked you to ally with him."

"I need not fulfill either of those circumstances to feel concern about him." Minerva held a stinging curse just behind her lips. It was true that Narcissa Malfoy had never borne the Dark Mark, never been among the accused Death Eaters, and was, on the few other occasions that Minerva met her after she left Hogwarts, a loving and devoted mother to her son. And it was true that people changed, and her husband was still Lucius Malfoy. "I am a professor, and he is my student. Tell me why you are really here. Now."

"It's the reason I explained," said Narcissa. "No more than that." She lifted her hands slightly, holding them away from her sides. "When Harry comes to meet me, ask him. It's the best way to dispel your suspicions."

Minerva was almost inclined to believe her then, since it would take a lot to get Harry to leave the ground with a former Death Eater's wife,

but she kept her wand steady anyway. With her grief barely behind her, it felt good to have a possible villain in front of her.

“Thank you for the invitation,” she said. “I think I will wait for Harry.”

Narcissa went still in that way only Slytherins had, as if her body had turned to nothing more than a rock casing for her brain. Minerva didn’t mind. Severus had often tried that trick with her. It hadn’t worked then, and he was better at it than Narcissa was.

Severus. His arrest was a bitter injustice, and now that she was free of that one overwhelming concern, Minerva thought she could spare some attention to it. Really, Albus should have done so already. The Prophet had reported that the Wizengamot would cast a vote to determine if they still had confidence in Fudge’s government in a few weeks. That alone should have suggested to Albus that the Minister might have a less than good reason to file charges against Severus.

They waited several minutes, until a pair of light footsteps came up the stairs from the Slytherin dungeons. Harry paused when he reached the top of the steps, and blinked a bit, pushing his glasses off his nose.

“Professor?” he asked. “Mrs. Malfoy? What’s the matter?”

“Mrs. Malfoy said she’d come to take you to a family property,” said Minerva, seeing no reason to mince words. “And since it’s unusual enough for a parent to visit Hogwarts grounds to see their own children, let alone to take or remove a child who is not theirs to care for—”

“Tell me,” Narcissa whispered, lowly enough that Minerva doubted Harry heard. “Who has been taking care of him?”

“—I thought I should make sure that you really did want to go with her,” said Minerva, seeing no reason to show that she’d heard, either. “Do you, Harry?”

Harry only blinked again, as if he could not fathom why it would be a matter of concern to anyone. "Of course, Professor." He gave her a faint smile. "Thank you for looking out for me."

Minerva simply nodded and turned to Narcissa before she put her wand away. "If he is not back by this evening," she said, "I will find you."

Narcissa was recovered from that Slytherin stillness now, shaking her head slightly. The smile on her lips was not a sneer only because it was too faint. "Oh, Professor," she said. "And what would you do if you could find me?"

Minerva raised a brow. Well, perhaps she needs a reminder of what a Gryffindor is in battle. "The same thing I did to Samson Flint," she said. "I understand they could never Transfigure him back at all."

That wiped Narcissa's mouth and face clean in a most satisfactory manner. Minerva turned and stalked towards the Great Hall.

She felt few qualms in letting Harry go, in truth. His magic was massive, and it was probable that Narcissa meant what she said, since she was the mother of Harry's best friend.

And, if Harry did not return by this evening, then Minerva knew where she was going.

Move forward. There is little use in looking back.

Narcissa stared after Minerva, more unnerved than she liked to admit. She was the one who turned Samson Flint into that—thing? His wife finally had to smother it in its sleep one night. Narcissa permitted herself one delicate shudder, which did not bounce her bandaged arm. I shall be careful of her, then.

She turned to welcome Harry, cocking her head slightly so that she could study his face behind the glasses. The dark circles under his eyes were pronounced, but his lack of expression would make most people look past that. His hair hung forward—not coincidentally, Narcissa thought, blocking a view of the lightning bolt scar on his

brow. His green eyes were far warier and more closed than they had been since the last time she saw him, at the end of August.

Who has been taking care of you, child? she thought, the sarcasm she had bounced at Minerva coming back to haunt her. Draco's letters have been normal, but that does not mean he has been. And with Severus gone...

"Hello, Harry," was what she allowed herself to say aloud. "I thought we would visit Number Twelve Grimmauld Place today, given that it is the main house, and the place where Sirius discovered the locket that possessed him."

Harry winced and looked over his shoulder as though he thought someone was there to hear them, but faced her with a small smile and an inclination of his head. "Yes, thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," he said. "I'd like that." He paused, his gaze grown suddenly sharper. "Have you hurt yourself?"

Narcissa wondered what should unnerve her more: that he had apparently seen through the cloth of her robe to the wound on her arm, or that he had sensed a change in her magic that alerted him that way. She would only make it worse if she pretended nothing had happened, though. Merlin knows that Harry needs people willing to be honest with him.

She drew back the robe so he could see the tied-off bandage. "A few of the people I tried to dance with proved rougher partners than I had anticipated," she said lightly.

Harry's eyes widened, and then came back to her face. Narcissa was unprepared for the self-blame that she saw there. "Perhaps you shouldn't do any more dances, Mrs. Malfoy," he whispered. "I couldn't live with myself if you lost yourself on one of the floors one night."

Oh, no, you don't. "I enjoy all the dances," said Narcissa. "The stately waltz and the pavane, of course, but also the ones where I must suddenly change partners, or where I stumble and take someone's sharp foot on mine. It keeps me busy, and it serves the purposes that

I feel must be served. I would feel much worse if I always sat at home or lingered along the wall and never did any dancing.”

Harry’s face went blank, but Narcissa knew him well enough to realize he was conducting an inner debate with himself: whether he should ask her to refrain from helping him, in the face of her pointed refusal. She also knew what she was going to say, so she contented herself with studying him again. She was sure that the circles under his eyes came from exhaustion, and his posture had subtly changed since that meeting at the end of August, as had the feeling of his magic. He was more resigned, more closed-in than before, where he had radiated hope and courage. It was something that Draco’s letters had never mentioned. Of course, Draco had been obsessed with his “special surprise” lately, something that he said his parents would understand better after Halloween night, but it wasn’t like him to miss an alteration in Harry so complete. Perhaps it was a kind not visible to someone who lived with him day-to-day, though.

I was right. No one else has been taking care of him at all.

She decided that she might as well start. “I am not desisting from my dancing, Harry,” she said. “If I ever get weary of it, be assured I will let you know at once.”

Harry studied her intently for a moment more, then nodded. “Please do tell me when it happens, Mrs. Malfoy.”

When, not if. The boy does not seem to trust anyone to stand by him. Narcissa tucked the tidbit away for later, and sidestepped right into bluntness. It was a move that Harry would not expect, after their guarded conversation of before. “How have you been, Harry?”

Harry blinked a few times, then sighed and rubbed at his face. Narcissa relaxed minutely. If he would confide in her, then she would be less worried about him. He had tried desperately to hide his gaping emotional wounds when he had come to the Manor last Christmas. Letting fresh air and sunlight fall on them would mean that he was past that state.

"I'm really worried about Draco, Mrs. Malfoy," he whispered. "He's been researching a certain potion lately. I don't know if he would want me to tell you all the details, but he hasn't been sleeping that much, and he's hinging all his happiness on the potion working. I don't know what will happen to him if it doesn't." Harry stared at his hands, as if he held a vision of the future there, and it wasn't a pretty one.

Narcissa swallowed. Draco's letters had been odd, yes, but she had not imagined they hid something this serious. "What is the potion?" she asked. Harry gave her a considering glance. "Harry, I am his mother, and I deserve to know."

Harry let out a windy sigh. "He really wants to become a magical heir to the Malfoy family, and he thinks he's found a potion that can help him achieve that. I don't know the formal name. And I don't know if the potion's going to work, either. It's pretty complicated. I've been helping him, but I'm half-afraid that he's setting himself up for a disappointment."

Narcissa closed her eyes. She remembered a few other times her son had been so caught up in a grand project: learning to fly over the house, making a gift for his father's birthday, making absolutely sure he was Sorted into Slytherin. When everything played itself out the way he wanted, he was happy. When it did not, then he was devastated.

Granted, for the last few years his obsession had been Harry Potter, and the final outcome of that project was more difficult to predict. Narcissa had been doing what she could to help, to make sure her son got what he wanted. But could she help with the potion?

"I'd like to talk to him, Harry, if you don't mind," she said. "Just for a few minuets before we leave."

Harry nodded to her. "Of course, Mrs. Malfoy. I hope you might be able to talk some sense into him. He's in the library already." He did her the courtesy of leading her up the stairs, though she remembered perfectly well from her years here where the Hogwarts library was.

Narcissa found her son surrounded by books and parchments, and with the look that she recognized on his face. She spoke with him, and he gave her all the expected answers, after a few fierce glares at Harry for giving the game away. No, he didn't want to tell her all the ramifications of the potion yet. Yes, he was sure it would work. Yes, Harry had been helping him.

No, he would not use it on Halloween night if she really didn't want him to.

He sulked all through that part of the promise, but Narcissa flattered herself that she knew him better than anyone in the world, and she knew when he finally muttered the words and threw his quill down on the table that he meant what he said. She kissed his forehead and left the school with Harry to Apparate them to London, secure in her mind about her son again.

Something did niggle at her in the back of her mind, though, and went on wearing and bothering her until that evening, when she had come back from Grimmauld Place shaken, and had leisure to figure it out.

Harry had rather deftly turned the conversation away from himself, got her to worry about Draco, and prevented her from asking more extensive questions about how he had been, all in one go.

"I don't know how we're going to get through the wards," said Narcissa softly. "You're absolutely sure that Regulus has not contacted you since the evening when he vanished?"

Harry nodded, and returned to studying the house in front of them. Number Twelve Grimmauld Place looked little different from all the other houses, really, Harry thought: broken windows, grimy walls, a knocker on the door. He had to squint sideways to see the shimmer of the silver wards, thick and unbroken, around those walls and windows, and that the knocker was made of silver and in the shape of a serpent coiled back on itself.

"If Regulus is dead, finally and forever," Narcissa whispered, "then the ownership has fallen to Bellatrix." She grimaced and slipped her wand into her palm. "I would prefer not to run into her."

"I would, too," said Harry. "She'd probably want her hand back, and she has a new wand."

He didn't realize what he was saying until Narcissa turned and gave him a sharp glance. "And how do you know that, Mr. Potter?" she whispered.

Harry shrugged. "Well, I was the one who cut off her hand," he said, playing for time. That had been in the Daily Prophet, too. Narcissa's stare only sharpened. Harry reached for and found a plausible lie, since the visions were no one's business but his own. "And Professor Moody said that she would get a new wand as soon as she could, even though she left her old one at Hogwarts. A Death Eater and a Dark witch wouldn't go long without a wand, he said."

Narcissa sighed, but seemed to accept his story, to Harry's vast relief. "A pity the Aurors did not think to watch Ollivander's," she murmured, and then stepped forward. "My name is Narcissa Black Malfoy," she said. She had not raised her voice far, but it carried well. Harry glanced at the Muggle houses, and hoped their owners were away for the morning, or still asleep. "I have visited this house as a child and an adult, both. I am friendly to the current heir, Regulus Black. I ask for permission to enter." She extended her wand towards the wards.

The wards waited until Narcissa's fingers were only a few inches from them, and then formed a silvery pair of jaws and lunged at her. Narcissa pulled her hand away, her mouth thinning. Harry thought that only good manners kept her from trying to hex the house, even as the wards fell back into place and gave a little snarl. She glanced at Harry and shook her head slightly.

"I cannot tell what that means," she said. "Either Regulus has not had time to lower the wards, or he is dead and the current heir does not wish me to enter the house."

Harry nodded. He decided that it was worth a try for him. Regulus had trusted him more than Narcissa. Perhaps he had keyed the wards to fall in the last extremity, if something happened to snatch him out of Harry's head.

Harry drew his own cypress wand from his pocket and took a few steps in front of Narcissa. "My name is Harry Potter," he told the wards, and the house, and whatever else was listening. "I am no relation by blood, but I am friendly with Regulus Black, and I was Sirius Black's godson." It was a risk mentioning Sirius, but he had worked spells that had convinced the house and even its house elf to accept him as true master. "Has Regulus left any message within you?"

The wards surged, then flowed out and over him, encasing him in a silvery skin before Harry could do more than blink. He heard Narcissa's startled cry, and then he heard nothing but—

Music.

The song moved around him, slow and thick and sluggish at first, but becoming faster as the wards flickered over his body. Harry held still and tried to breathe as shallowly as he could. The sensation was rather like being underwater, save that it affected his mind, too. His thoughts quickened, until they seemed to race around his head, and he heard the song coming from several hundred frenzied throats at once.

The wards must have found whatever it was they were looking for. They gave a final loud note, a twitch, and a twist, and fell away, leaving a hole just large enough for him to enter, and Narcissa if she ducked.

Harry swallowed and looked back at her. "I—I don't know what I did, but I think we're invited inside," he said, a bit lamely.

Narcissa narrowed her eyes, and she nodded. "Regulus must have left a hole for you," she said, edging nearer as if she expected the wards to attack any moment. They did not, only humming to themselves. Narcissa ducked through swiftly anyway, then shook her head and glanced back at Harry. "Come on," she said. "They may not permit us inside for long. If necessary, I can use a Portkey to take us back to Malfoy Manor from within the house, but we must open the front door first."

Harry nodded, and hastily followed her down the half-broken walkway. The black door opened as they approached it, and Harry heard a deep, distant thrill of music again.

“Why do the wards sing, Mrs. Malfoy?” he asked.

She glanced back at him in surprise, tearing her eyes from whatever inside the house had occupied her attention. “I have never been aware of them doing so, Harry.”

Harry swallowed and decided to ignore the teasing little thread of song that followed him as he stepped inside the house. Regulus probably did have something to do with this. Narcissa had said that the wards were tight enough to prevent anyone from entering the house whom the true Black heir did not want in here. How else could they have fallen, if Regulus hadn’t told them to allow Harry in?

That doesn’t explain the singing, or why Narcissa could come with you.

Harry ignored the thought, and took in the sight in front of him. The entrance hall had most definitely seen better days. The wallpaper yearned in curling strips towards the floor, itself covered with a carpet which had stronger cousins in spiderwebs. Gas lamps flickered here and there, and filled the hall with as much shadow as light. There was a candelabra made as a serpent—a sight that Harry ordinarily wouldn’t have minded, since, after all, he carried a snake on his arm, but this one had been shaped, by some art to the head and the neck, to look as malevolent as possible.

Portraits hung on the walls, all of them of past Blacks. A pair of curtains hid what Harry knew would be a portrait of Sirius’s and Regulus’s mother. Sirius had mentioned her a time or two, always with a bitter twist to his lips when he spoke. Knowing, now, how she had abused Sirius, Harry wasn’t surprised.

“Move quietly,” Narcissa breathed. “Aunt Capella tends to scream about blood traitors in the house, whether there actually are or—”

“FILTH! BLOOD TRAITORS!” came from behind the curtains.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, Sirius told me about her,” he said dryly. He glanced at the curtains, and wondered if it was worth the effort of opening them. Probably not, he thought. They could cast a Silencio and hold it there, and then she wouldn’t disturb them or cover any cry for help that Regulus might make.

He aimed his wand and started to concentrate on the incantation, but almost at once, Capella Black’s screams ceased. Harry stared, and blinked. He glanced at Narcissa, who looked as mystified as he had.

Then the portrait’s voice started again, low and sly and sounding as if she were talking to herself. “Of course, I should have known. Dark magic, sweet and powerful. They would not have sent someone into the house who did not smell of Dark magic, powerful and sweet.”

Harry swallowed. He didn’t want to think of what that might mean, that he had used so much Dark magic that a witch who sympathized with the Death Eaters thought he smelled good.

Narcissa patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry about it,” she whispered. “Aunt Capella was mad before the end. Let’s just be grateful that she’s not disturbing us, and get on with the work.” She turned towards the looming staircase. “I know the place to go first, which should tell us whether or not Regulus is still alive.”

Harry nodded and followed her, though a time or two he glanced back towards the portrait. Capella Black was laughing.

Harry heard a trill of music again, deep and self-satisfied as the laughter.

He shuddered, then tried not to worry about it.

“Yes,” said Narcissa softly, stepping away from the tapestry and gesturing for Harry to move closer so that he could see for himself. “He is still alive.”

Harry felt the breath rush out of him as he gazed at the tapestry. It displayed the names of the Black descendants in a twining tree, with the motto *Toujours pur* at the top. Under Capella and Canopus lay the names of Sirius and Regulus. Sirius's name was in faded thread, Regulus's in brilliant silver.

He glanced at the other side of the cloth, and nodded when he saw that the names of Bellatrix Black Lestrage and Narcissa Black Malfoy were also silver, as were the names of Lucius and Draco. In between Bellatrix and Narcissa was what looked like a blasted bit of cloth. Harry raised his eyebrows at Narcissa.

Narcissa's smile was small and tight. "Aunt Capella didn't approve of Andromeda marrying Ted Tonks," she murmured. "And, really, Sirius shouldn't have been on this tapestry, either. It was only the magic he worked that made the house consider him as heir." She shook her head and turned away. "We know that Regulus is alive now, but I don't suppose you have any idea on how to find him, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "He always told me his body was somewhere small and dark, and that he felt shut in. He had preservation spells cast on him, probably, to prevent him from feeling hunger and thirst, and he'd been through a lot of pain."

Narcissa half-closed her eyes. "I know most of the hiding places in this house," she said, and drew a piece of parchment from her robes, along with a quill. She scribed several dozen lines down on the parchment, then tore it in half and gave the lower part to Harry. "We'll have to split up," she explained, "or we'll never get through all the hiding places. And I don't know if the wards will ever let us in again, so it makes sense to do all our searching at once."

Harry nodded. It did make sense. Merlin knew that he wanted to find Regulus, now that he knew he was still alive. "There are Dark creatures living in here, aren't there?" he asked.

"Yes. But I suspect you can handle them, Harry, or I would insist on accompanying you to each hiding place." Narcissa smiled slightly, her eyes fastened on him. "Now that Kreacher is dead, none of them are so fanatically devoted to protecting our house and effects. Doxies,

boggarts, ghouls...nothing worse.” She shook her head. “They should let me alone, since I’m of the Black blood, and the security measures wouldn’t permit anything very dangerous inside.”

“We can bite anything that threatens you,” the Many volunteered from his arm. “Tell her that.”

Harry just shook his head, because the Many wanted to bite everything sooner or later, and studied his list. Second closet from the top of the staircase on the uppermost floor, secret door under the bookshelves in the library, compartment under the turning chair in the library...

“Call for help, of course, Harry, if you find something you can’t handle,” Narcissa continued, drawing his attention back to her. “And I will do the same thing.”

Harry relaxed a bit. She was evidently trusting him to act like an adult. That made him happy, since it meant she was less likely to question him about things he didn’t want her to question him about on the assumption that he couldn’t take care of himself.

“I will, Mrs. Malfoy,” he agreed, and went to go hunt out the library, as five of the hiding places on his list concerned it.

Harry shook his head and pulled out of the compartment in the floor. The turning chair settled back into place over it with a small grinding noise the moment Harry stood up again. It would have made an excellent hiding place for Regulus, Harry reflected, if Regulus were no more than six inches long and five wide. Narcissa had been good to her word about listing all the small and secret places in the house, though.

Harry looked thoughtfully around the room. Maybe I’ve gone about this wrong. I’m not surprised that Regulus can’t answer us when we call, and I’m not finding anything by peering into every hidden corner. Maybe I can sense his magic.

He concentrated, and then staggered back and sat down hard in the chair. The library was blazing with Dark magic of every stripe, several

dozen nasty spells and curses waiting for anyone who tried to remove a book from the room, dirty the chair cushions, enter when they were Muggleborn, or tear pages.

Harry was even more uneasy about the blaze of spells that he didn't recognize.

He stood up, swiping dust from his robes, and then paused, turning his head. The music was back again, and this time it came from a different direction, beyond the library door. Harry moved towards it, stepping carefully over the low-running vines and stripes of curses.

The music increased in pitch and volume, as if the singer could feel him coming. Beyond the library was another staircase upward, barely lit at all. Harry remembered that he needed to check out the second closet from the top of it on the uppermost floor, anyway, and climbed. His feet hardly seemed to make a sound. The singing vibrated in his bones and curled around his waist like a cord, tugging him forward. He did remember to whisper a Lumos charm so that he could see where he was going.

The melody come from the second closet from the top of the staircase. Harry experienced a brief moment of amusement, and then one of hope. Perhaps Regulus was making the sound, and that was why the wards had sung when they fell in front of him. Harry had not dared hope that finding him would be this easy.

Then the music picked up again, and Harry felt those concerns torn from him as though they were clouds in a windy sky. The song was quite beautiful enough on its own, ringing again and again with the tones of struck silver. It sobbed and warbled and dipped, and Harry could hear intense sorrow in it, as well as the coaxing beauty.

He laid a hand on the closet door. The lines of many spells crisscrossed it. They were all binding spells. Of course they were, Harry thought, somewhere hazily, beyond the song, in the part of his brain not consumed with it. Some Black in the past had really, really not wanted this door to be opened.

Or perhaps it was Voldemort. Regulus could still be in there.

A noise clashed with the song, mingled with it, and welled into his ears. Harry could hear a soft clicking sound from beyond the door. He concentrated, and decided that it came from many pairs of legs.

The song fell away, and left a voice behind.

Let me out.

Harry blinked. Well, he could do it, couldn't he? Of course he could. He was the vates, and this sounded like a confined magical creature. And though the binding spells on the door were quite complex, he could release a blast of magic, or even draw on the magic of the spells around him, and release them that way.

The voice whispered, tense and excited.

Not that way. It must be Dark magic or nothing.

Harry blinked again, then nodded. Of course it must be. This was a Dark creature of some kind, imprisoned in a Dark house. And Capella Black had stopped screaming when she sensed Harry's Dark power. It only made sense.

He stepped away from the door. The creature gave a low, eager bubbling sound, and then started singing again.

"Harry, stop!"

Harry had jumped and turned to face Narcissa before he realized what he was doing. She held up her hands at once, even dropping her own wand to the floor with a flick. Her blue eyes were wide, looking like smudged pale shadows in her equally pale face.

"Don't," she whispered. "I should not have written that hiding place down, Harry. It was in use during my childhood, but Uncle Canopus confined something there the year that Sirius ran away. He died from the wounds it gave him, in the end. Do not undo the binding spells. I do not think that anything could stop it once it was released."

“I’m a powerful wizard,” said Harry. The song was in his mind, and it made everything make sense. “It’s confined, and it would be grateful for its freedom, anyway. It wouldn’t hurt me.”

Narcissa shook her head. “Uncle Canopus confined it only because he was magically average, Harry,” she said, slowly, softly, taking soft and slow steps towards him. “It fed on the powerful wizards it found before him. That’s why it can get to you, Harry. It’s not singing at me. It doesn’t want me.”

Let me out, the voice said, and the music fell away.

The creature had misjudged, Harry knew a moment later. The sudden loss of the song combined with Narcissa’s words to tear his mind out of the confining fog it had been in. He took a step back, his breathing loud and harsh in the silence. He shuddered.

Well, that’s the first time a magical creature has tried to compel me into breaking its web.

And I am not a blind vates. I cannot charge into freeing this thing until I know what it is, and what it would cost to have it free.

“What are you?” he asked aloud.

It does not matter. Let me out.

Harry shook his head. “I think it matters,” he muttered. He could not believe how stupid he had almost been. He looked at Narcissa. “Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said. “Where else should we look for Regulus?”

Narcissa sighed. “I’ve cast all the spells I can think of, Harry, spells that should have revealed the presence of human flesh and blood anywhere in the house. It only showed me and you. Regulus isn’t here. At least, his body isn’t here.”

“But we have to find him,” said Harry. “If we don’t—“

Narcissa gently closed a hand on his shoulder. "There are other Black estates."

"But we don't know if the wards will let us into them." Harry couldn't understand why Narcissa kept holding his shoulder and looking at him with such concern in her eyes. "At least we're inside this house now, and we can look other places. Maybe Voldemort laid a spell to confound the ones you used."

Narcissa smiled thinly. "I used several that only the Black family knows," she said. "The Dark Lord is powerful, was powerful, but even he is limited by his knowledge."

"Regulus could have betrayed them to him. Just let me open this door—"

"Harry." Narcissa's hand pressed down firmly. "The creature's song is starting to snare you again."

Harry gave a guilty start, and winced when he realized what he had said. "You want to get me away from here," he said quietly.

Narcissa nodded, and glared at the door. Harry didn't look himself, too afraid it would turn into a longing stare. "I do not believe, now, that the Dark Lord brought Regulus's body here, in any case," she said. "The creature would have tried to feed on him in turn."

"Maybe he was strong enough to escape."

Narcissa shook her head. "The stronger you are, the mightier a hold the creature has on you," she said.

"Maybe some of his Death Eaters rescued him."

Narcissa knelt down in front of Harry, clasping his shoulders. "I want you out of here, and now," she said. "It is not quite evening, but we can look again later, Harry. The wards will probably let us in again, now that they have once. And even if they don't," she added, anticipating Harry's next response, "I would still rather have you safe than Regulus found immediately. You can't sense him, and he is alive."

That might mean he is not in pain, that the Dark Lord has simply blocked him from reaching you somehow.”

Harry closed his eyes and fought down the compulsion to stay. When he looked, he could feel the subtle strands of the song wound about him, and he plucked and tore them from him with disgust.

He might have stepped from full darkness into full sunshine. Abruptly, he wanted nothing so much as to be outside the walls of the house. He shivered, opened his eyes, and nodded to Narcissa.

“Let’s go.”

Narcissa smiled at him and escorted him away from the closet door, which Harry resolutely didn’t look back at again. They passed Capella Black’s portrait, and Harry heard her laugh. He winced, expecting an outburst of shouting, but she merely sniffed, as if drawing in a deep breath.

“You smell so good, child,” she whispered. “So strongly of the Dark.”

Harry heard a chiming trickle of music slide past his ears, as if in complement to the chuckle.

He let Narcissa take him outside and back through the hole in the wards, which mended itself seamlessly behind them. As they arranged themselves for Side Along Apparition, Harry resolutely did not look back.

I can’t just go around freeing everything the moment it asks me to do so. I’ll study and learn more about what that creature is if I can, but just unleashing it wouldn’t make me responsible, either. I have to remember that my magic is in service to many people, not just one.

He ignored the sound of song in his ears even after they had landed at Hogwarts, but he didn’t mention that to Narcissa. The tugging at his temple told him that Draco needed him, and he hurried off, grateful for a task that he could fling himself into.

Move forward. There is little use in looking back.

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Light Lord's Bargain

Harry frowned at Connor.

Connor blinked at him. "What?"

Harry gestured around the abandoned classroom—the third one they'd used for this purpose, given that neither of them wanted to go back to the room that had been the scene of several bitter fights between them, and the second classroom was now thoroughly occupied locking away Snape's Meleager Potion. "How many people did you tell about this, anyway?"

Connor glanced back along the ranks of tables and desks, and shrugged in a way that Harry could wish was more repentant. "Well, Ron and Hermione knew already. And Ron might have mentioned something to Neville. Why do you mind? You like Neville."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Connor, half of Gryffindor House is here. And I'd say at least a quarter of Ravenclaw. And—who now?" The door had opened, and several tall students Harry didn't know, but who wore Hufflepuff ties, had just come in. From their size, Harry guessed they were probably seventh-years.

One of them came towards him, hand held out to shake. Harry accepted it warily, less because he was afraid the boy was trying to trick him than because of the sheer strangeness of seventh-years showing up to listen to a fourth-year. This boy, at least, had a forthright expression on his face, and gray eyes that reminded Harry of Sirius, though they were considerably less shadowed than Sirius's had ever been.

"My name's Cedric Diggory," he said, and gave Harry a faint smile. "Seventh-year Hufflepuff. Hope you don't mind, but Zacharias would not be quiet about these lessons, and it's so rare that something impresses the little—" He paused, and Harry could hear the considerably more impolite word that he might have put in there. "Fellow," Cedric finished smoothly, "that I thought we should see what it's all about."

Harry nodded, rifling through his mental files on the Diggorys. Light family, lived not far from the Weasleys, more strongly allied to the Light than the Weasleys were. Traditionally a Hufflepuff and pureblood family, but they'd had their fair share of relatives in every House but Slytherin, and they'd intermarried with Muggleborns a few times in the last century. Harry supposed he could trust Cedric as far as he could throw him.

"Welcome, then," he said, with a shrug. "I think that we'll probably be covering ground that you already know, but thank you for coming."

Cedric nodded at him, and led the group of Hufflepuffs towards the back of the room. Harry stood at the front of it, and shook off the temptation to bristle with sweat. Attention like this was understandable, because the people looking at him wanted something from him that Harry was sure he could give. He met Luna's eyes, and saw her smiling calmly at him, as if she couldn't conceive of him failing. He tried to meet Cho's gaze, but saw it locked on Cedric, and what he saw in her face made him raise his eyebrows.

Oh. I wonder if Cedric has more than one reason for coming to this lesson.

"Very well," he said aloud. "I explained about the nature of Light and Dark wizards in our lesson last time, and I don't know what you want to hear about now." He glanced at Hermione, whose quill was poised above her parchment. "I can continue that lesson, but—"

"Show us some spells." That was Zacharias Smith, who was leaning back against one of the desks as though he were too important—or self-important, Harry had to admit—to actually sit down. "Unless you're too powerful and afraid of injuring one of these pretty little babes, of course."

"Go after Smith first," Harry heard Ron mutter.

Harry couldn't help smiling. "But we're not supposed to use magic out of class," he said, innocently, even as he let his wand fall into his hand. He wasn't about to show everyone how easily wandless magic came to him. Let them imagine that was only for moments like the

one on the Quidditch Pitch last November, when his power burst forth from him.

“That’s in the corridors,” said Hermione, more snottily than Harry had ever heard her. He realized that she must want to see some magic, too. She’d even put down her quill and leaned forward, her hands folded on the desk. “We’re in a classroom. I think you can show us magic, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “What do you want to see, offensive magic or defensive magic or—” He cut himself off abruptly. I can’t offer to show them Dark Arts, for Merlin’s sake!

“Offensive,” said Zacharias, before anyone else could say anything. “I’ve heard that’s your weakness, and if you’re weak on the offensive, then how can you hope to lead us in battle?”

Harry raised a brow. He does pick at everyone, doesn’t he? “All right,” he said. “You’ll let me pick the spell myself, I presume?”

“You’d better, Potter,” said Zacharias. “I won’t be there in the middle of battle to tell you what to do.”

A few people chuckled at that, but more leaned forward, their eyes never wavering from Harry’s face. Harry concealed a disgusted sigh, and aimed his wand directly ahead of him. For a moment, the only offensive spells he could think of were Dark Arts, since Snape had tutored him so extensively in those the last few weeks before he went away.

Then he shook himself, and normal magic came back to him. “Speculum Ardoris!” he said clearly.

Fire burst out of the tip of his wand, more controlled than it was when he used wandless magic, since it had a container to funnel itself through. Harry found himself wondering abruptly if he could do the same thing with that wandless magic, using his body as a container.

Then he had to work on controlling the spell, which tended to wander in strips of flame if he didn’t watch out. He wove dazzling mirrors in

front of each student's face, enough to cause some of them to draw their wands and even shoot out a mild jinx or two. The flame mirrors bounced them right back, and several people fell unconscious before Harry dismissed the spell.

Zacharias regarded him with dispassionate eyes as Harry revived a girl knocked down by her own deflected Stunning Spell. "I thought that was ordinarily a defensive piece of magic," he said.

Harry shrugged. "It is. But it's easy to learn how to send it to confuse your enemies instead. The heat and the light are more intense than with a normal fire. It reaches into people's minds and panics them, and then they start using magic even when they know that they shouldn't."

Zacharias grinned at him. "You're all right, Potter," he said, as he lazily awakened one of his Housemates. "Going to make a good war leader."

Harry narrowed his eyes, and chose the victim nearest Zacharias to practice the next Ennervate on. "What do you mean by that?" he whispered. He thought he was probably speaking low enough that no one else could hear him. "These lessons are for Connor, to let him practice in being a good leader. He's the one who'll have to guide us on the battlefield and defeat Voldemort. Boy-Who-Lived, remember?"

Zacharias was really very annoying when he had that considering look on his face, Harry decided. "Why should we worry about you training a war leader?" he asked. "Why not use the one we already have?"

"I'm not the Boy-Who-Lived," said Harry, and moved on to a boy who'd somehow managed to make boils grow on his own face, though the spell he used at the flame mirror should have resulted in them on his hands.

"I beg to differ," Zacharias whispered. "If the Boy-Who-Lived is the champion we need to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, then you are."

Harry stiffened his spine and refused to look at the annoying Hufflepuff again. He doesn't really know anything. He's just making guesses.

The fact that they were scarily accurate guesses, and ones that might be influential on the people around them, was not the point, Harry thought.

When he'd revived the last person, Harry returned to the front of the class. "That's why showing off magic in an enclosed space is dangerous," he remarked wryly. "Are you sure that you wouldn't rather have a history lesson now?"

"I want to try that spell," said Hermione, predictably, rising from the desk while clutching her wand. "Why would you say it *Speculum Ardoris*, though?" She pronounced the spell the way Harry had, though she made her stresses on the incantation obvious. "I think I've heard of this spell, but the emphases were in different places."

"The difference in the stresses transforms it from a defensive to an offensive spell," Harry explained. "Rather than just surrounding yourself with flame, you actively use it to confuse your enemies."

Hermione frowned and settled a hand on her hip. "But I've never heard of that," she said, managing to make it sound as though her never having heard of that variation of the spell was a crime against nature. "Where did you come up with that?"

Harry saw no need to tell her that he'd come up with it himself, by accident, during the summer before second year. "From a book that Hogwarts library probably doesn't have," he said amiably. "Our father is pureblood, remember? There are lots of books they like to retain for themselves."

Hermione sighed and nodded.

"Do you want to try it?" Harry asked.

Hermione carefully aimed her wand and said the spell, with the stresses the same way Harry had performed them.

Flame welled weakly from her wand and whirled into a shield that wandered off as it would attack Zacharias. Harry performed an Accio and summoned it back towards them, shaking his head. "You have to concentrate on your opponent, or your opponents, or it just goes towards whoever you happen to be thinking about," he explained, keeping it to himself that it was interesting Hermione would be thinking about Zacharias. She normally seemed to ignore the Hufflepuff outside class.

Hermione nodded again, her face more serious this time, and managed to form a shield of flame around him on her second try. Harry knew the counter for it, of course; he erected a Protego, and the combination of two spells that reflected other attacks facing each other destabilized and destroyed the Flame Mirror. Hermione blinked at him as her wisps of red and gold flame spun into nothingness.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

Harry was more than happy to explain the theory behind it, especially since it now seemed as though other people besides Hermione and Zacharias were taking an interest in what was happening. Connor was practicing small movements with his wand, murmuring the spells under his breath. Ron tapped his wand nervously on the desk he sat at, though that stopped when he saw Harry watching him; he tried as best he could to pronounce the spell, though he didn't produce more than a few bits of smoke. The seventh-year Hufflepuffs had already spread out in a dueling ring, which Harry wasn't surprised to see that Cedric had organized.

Harry caught Luna's eye. She was sitting and staring in wonder at the ceiling of the classroom, but she nodded and turned towards him when he came up to her.

"Is something the matter, Luna?" Harry asked softly. He hadn't spent much time with her this year, but she hadn't seemed quite this dreamy and distracted before. He glanced at the ceiling himself, but could see nothing to fascinate her there.

"Don't you see the old shields?" Luna whispered.

“Old shields?” Harry squinted obediently upward again, but could still make nothing out.

“Yes,” said Luna. “Someone held this classroom against a siege once. The old furniture says so.” She touched the chair she sat on. “This one is talking to me about Helga Hufflepuff.”

Harry stared. The chair certainly didn’t look that old.

“Oh, no, it didn’t know her,” said Luna. “It heard the story from another, older desk, and that desk heard it from another one, and back, and so on.” She stroked the desk’s surface with affection. “But they don’t really mean to talk to me. They just have old magic on them, and I can sense it.”

Harry sat down in the desk beside her. Hermione was drilling Connor and Ron, Cedric was drilling Cho and the Hufflepuffs who had joined them, and Zacharias was walking around and poking holes in everyone else’s spell technique. No one needed him at the moment. “So what does the chair say about Helga Hufflepuff?”

Luna gestured around the room. “This used to be her private study. She would retreat here and meditate, or sometimes simply come up with new spells to hold and defend the earth. She loved gardening, you know, but it wasn’t something she was very good at by itself. She made up spells to defend the garden from weeds and beetles and pests.” Luna closed her eyes, as if meditating. “And she held the classroom against a siege by Slytherin once.”

Harry blinked. “I thought Slytherin and Gryffindor were enemies, not Slytherin and anyone else.”

“Oh, that was after he went mad,” said Luna seriously, opening her eyes and regarding him again. “I’m sure he didn’t mean it.”

Harry frowned, and thought of the history book on Slytherin that Narcissa Malfoy had given him for his first Christmas with the Malfoys. “I don’t recall that he was insane,” he said at last. “He just left the

school when he got so disgusted with Gryffindor that he couldn't stand it anymore."

"That's not what the chair says," said Luna.

Harry studied the desk at what Luna sat with new determination. Could Luna really sense the vibrations of magic left behind, without even needing to cast a spell? That was a useful skill. And it would explain why she wandered around distracted most of the time. She was seeing a world that most wizards weren't even aware existed, and it would take a lot to persuade her to pay attention to the real one.

"Can you do Speculum Ardoris?" he asked, to distract himself from asking more about her ability. He didn't want Luna to feel harassed and pressured, or as if he cared only about what use her skill could be to him in battle and not about her as a person.

"No one but you could do it before this morning," said Luna, "pronounced that way."

Harry snorted. "I told Hermione I found it in a book—"

"And your wand says that you didn't," said Luna. "It's been radiating that magic for a few years now. I think you invented it."

Harry sighed. "In a way, but it's not something I want many people to know about."

Luna nodded at him. "I understand. Wrackspurts," she said, as if that explained everything, and then drew her wand and set to practicing by herself.

Harry shook his head and stood, just as the door of the classroom opened. Harry turned, wondering if they were to have another visitor.

His mood changed dramatically when he realized it was Professor Moody stepping through the door. He bowed to the ex-Auror, thinking hard all the while. Why is he here now? Did he sense the magic, and come to make sure that we weren't practicing any Dark Arts? Or is he

going to do something odd, like the way he spoke to me the last time we had a private conversation?

“Though I felt magic up here,” grunted Moody, answering part of the question. “What are you doing?” He fixed his gaze on Harry, as if he assumed that Harry was the leader of this, whatever it was.

I’m a teacher, not a leader, Harry thought in irritation, but there would be little point in letting Moody see that irritation, so he didn’t. “I wanted to train my brother in some pureblood history, sir,” he said. “He invited along some friends, and then they wanted to see a spell instead. We’re practicing Speculum Ardoris.” He made sure to pronounce it the way it would be pronounced in the defensive spell, and thought he saw Moody’s shoulders loosen towards relaxation.

“Good, very good,” Moody said. “Extra practice, eh? A way of getting ready to defeat Dark Lords?”

“Well, Connor certainly needs it, sir,” said Harry, and then turned and motioned his brother forward. Connor had been successful with the Flame Mirror, or so he thought from watching him from the corner of his eye. “Do you want to show Professor Moody your magic, Connor?”

The expression on his brother’s face clearly said that it wasn’t his life’s dream, but he did take a deep breath, draw his wand, and then cast the Speculum Ardoris carefully in front of him.

Moody dissipated the Flame Mirror almost lazily, but his face was thoughtful. “Perhaps I should be teaching more magic that you could participate in during class,” he mused.

Harry refrained from nodding, though he saw many other heads around the room joining in, even the seventh-years. That’s odd, he thought. He had assumed Moody’s method of ranting at them about constant vigilance and showing them spells they couldn’t legally perform, like the Unforgivable Curses, was because they were fourth-years, too young to be trusted with the powerful magic. But perhaps even his upper classes received the same treatment.

“A little demonstration, then,” said Moody, slapping his wand against his palm. “Should you and I duel, Potter?”

Harry would have tried to pretend that Moody was talking about Connor, save that the professor’s eyes, both mortal and magical, were fixed on him. He took a little breath and drew his cypress wand.

“If you wish, sir,” he said softly.

It was amazing, or amusing, or both, how quickly the desks were pushed to the sides of the room, leaving Harry and Moody a clear space to move in. Luna gave Harry a final glance, said, “At least he’s not a Heliopath,” and joined the other students in leaning against the walls. She was the last to speak. The others were silent, intent on what was about to happen.

“Begin, then,” said Moody, and bowed to Harry.

Harry bowed back, though his mind was racing not with thoughts of the spells that he could put into the duel, but with reminders to himself. Channel your magic through your wand only. No advanced spells. No Dark Arts. Defend if you can, but never let on that that’s all you’re doing.

“Diffindo!” came Moody’s first spell, and Harry snapped up the Shield Charm, just barely remembering to blurt out the incantation that went with it. He caught Moody’s gaze, and realized that the Defense Professor didn’t intend to go easy on him.

“Full duel, Potter,” Moody whispered, and his second and third spell crackled at Harry. “Finite Incantatem. Abicio!”

Harry ducked the Flinging Hex as his Shield Charm dissipated, and decided that he would have to do something, or look as if he were merely scrambling around on the floor in front of his professor.

“Haurio,” he murmured, casting the jade-green shield on his left hand that would catch most curses flung at him, and then chose a spell that he knew had been more common twenty years ago, during

Voldemort's first rise. Moody ought to know it, at least, having worked as an Auror then. "Obturbo!"

Moody's ears would be filled with an annoying buzzing sound about now, Harry knew. In a moment, the sounds would move into his inner ears, and then he would lose his balance. It would bring a quick end to the duel—

Or it should have, had not Moody narrowed his eyes and simply snapped, "Finite Incantatem. Abicio!" again.

The wave of the spell was too wide for the Absorption Charm to affect, and this time it caught Harry. He was grateful for the absence of desks as he went sailing ten feet, and landed in a roll. Lily had taught him how to fall, though, even if that had been from a broom, and he came back to his feet in a few moments.

"Occaeco Manicula," Harry murmured, slipping now into the mindset of defending himself from an enemy. No Dark Arts, his brain reminded him, but he had bruises on the back of his head and arms now from the way he had landed, and he could no longer consider this just a demonstration for the other students, or a way of keeping his professor from learning all he could do. This was a situation that might end up with him getting seriously hurt, and then he would have to recover in the hospital wing and would be of no help to anyone.

Moody jumped as a small, invisible hand pinched him, and then Harry sent it to attack his hand, trying to get the wand out of his grip. He didn't think a simple Expelliarmus would work on an experienced Auror, but the hand was harder to resist and infinitely more annoying.

That did not mean that Moody was inclined to give up, of course, and he showed it when he studied Harry for a moment, ostentatiously ignoring the hand's efforts. Harry had just climbed to his feet when Moody pointed his wand and said, "Sentire calamitatem noctis!"

Harry grunted as a mental blow fell on and flowed over him. Abruptly, he could feel all the sleep he had lost recently—probably since school began, since that was how long Moody had known him, and this spell could only be used on the basis of the caster's knowledge of the

subject. He wanted nothing so much as to go to sleep, and spend the next several days and nights asleep, not helping Draco with the potion or worrying about Snape or advising the magical creatures or teaching lessons or shielding himself or...

Harry did a wandless, nonverbal Finite Incantatem, and picked his head up, meeting Moody's eyes again. He knew that he did not imagine the emotions he saw there, though they surprised him. Moody looked as if he feared and respected Harry, both at once.

I'm not doing that well against him, Harry thought in bewilderment, and then had to dodge as Moody tried to use the Flinging Hex, again. Harry wondered if he was running low, or just really liked that curse, for some reason.

Harry waited for a long moment, running as busily as he could around the ring of students, dodging the hexes and curses Moody threw, and then pinched him hard on the nerve in his right arm with the invisible hand, while shouting, "Expelliarmus!" at the same time.

Moody's wand soared out of his hand, and Harry managed to grab it. He took a panting breath, and then bowed to Moody. He resisted the temptation to mumble something incoherent and go to sleep on the floor. The Sleep Debt Spell had hit him hard. I should take better care of myself, he thought, as he tossed the wand back to its rightful owner, to make sure that I'm ready when and if Draco or Connor or someone else needs me.

"Yes, more active magic in the class will definitely be a bonus," Moody muttered, his eyes never leaving Harry.

"I'm glad, sir," said Harry, and then turned back to answer the questions that his makeshift class had, barely noticing as Moody slipped out. If that had been a test of some kind, it appeared that Harry had passed it.

The unintended consequence, of course—at least, Harry hadn't intended them, and he was sure that Moody hadn't, either—was that everyone else wanted to learn all the spells Harry and Moody had used during the duel, and not all of them could perform all of them,

and people fussed, and Harry had to spend some time reviving people stupefied by finding out how much sleep they'd lost, all the while wishing for his bed.

I can't see it, he reminded himself for the fiftieth time, as he brought Hermione back to the waking world. I have work to do.

"Ah, Harry. Come in, please."

Harry entered the Headmaster's office cautiously. It was true that Dumbledore had sent a politely-worded note to him during dinner, requesting his presence here, and it was true that Harry didn't have any more pressing errand. Even Draco didn't require him, wound up as he was in the final time-consuming but relatively simple steps for finishing the potion. So long as Dumbledore didn't try to hurt him or break the bargains they had promised to abide by, why not come?

That every muscle in his body was aching and crying out for bed was not sufficient excuse, Harry thought.

"Do have a seat," said Dumbledore, and Harry realized he'd been standing by his chair, lost in thought. He shook his head slightly and took the seat, refused the expected sweet, and looked at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore's eyes were narrowed, his face shrewd. He stroked his beard as if he knew something Harry didn't.

Quite possible, Harry thought. Everyone seemed to have secrets lately. Connor had been writing to James in private, and said that he didn't want Harry involved in the arguments he was holding with his father. Hermione was starting to return Zacharias Smith's crush with interest, and there were numerous other crushes that their owners, at least, took care to keep concealed blossoming in dusty corners of the school. McGonagall had returned to teaching with a new fire and passion that had been missing for the last two months, which made Harry think something must have been happened. Draco said that his potion would surprise everyone, even though Harry knew everything about it now, and Blaise Zabini had been hinting outrageously about

the meeting Harry would have with Lucius Malfoy and the other Dark wizards in a few days' time.

"I suppose," said Dumbledore, "that you have not thought about needing my support, or you would have come to me before now."

Harry blinked, torn out of his thoughts again. "What, Headmaster?"

"I am Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Harry," said Dumbledore gently. "You'll need my vote to depose Fudge and to free Severus when his trial comes before us in December. And yet, you have made no request for my support."

Harry stiffened. Another complication that I didn't need. "I simply assumed, sir," he said. "that you would do what is right."

"Ah." Dumbledore shook his head. "But what is right? A question much debated by philosophers, and by wizards."

Harry bared his teeth. "You must know that Fudge is the wrong Minister for us, Headmaster," he said, "what with Voldemort coming back the way he is. We need someone strong in office, and Fudge is hysterical and prone to leaping at shadows. You should have replaced him yourself already. And Snape—he was arrested because of me, not because of himself. You could make everyone see that. I understand a little more about how Lords work in politics, now. Your magic guarantees you a lot of things."

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, it does, Harry, but I prefer to work within the bounds of law whenever possible, and leave people's free choices up to themselves. I am, after all, a Light Lord. And the people of Great Britain have chosen Fudge to lead them as Minister of Magic, and more than once. I saw no reason to contest their decision, not when Cornelius did seem to be doing a good job."

"And when he abducted me, and you found out what he'd been doing?" Harry demanded. "Why didn't you do something then? He nearly drained my magic, Headmaster. You can't have that. If I'm a Squib, then two possible interpretations of the prophecy—the one

where I'm Connor's protector and the one where I'm the soldier who has to defeat Voldemort—get messed up.”

“Not necessarily, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “There is still love, and I believe that love, and not magical power, is the key to defeating Voldemort.”

Harry ground his teeth, and didn't dignify that with an answer. Dumbledore had done little to help him so far, and more to hinder. And it didn't seem as though he were done hindering.

“What do you want?” Harry asked instead.

Dumbledore beamed. “Ah, yes, Harry, I thought you would never ask,” he said. “I am prepared to make one bargain with you, a very simple one. Fulfill it, and you are guaranteed that I will vote against Fudge's remaining in office and for Severus's freedom. That is all.”

Harry stared at him. “You would swear that by Merlin and your magic?”

“By one of the even more ancient oaths, if you would prefer that,” said Dumbledore. “But I do so swear. By Merlin and by my magic, I will vote against Fudge and for Severus if Harry Potter fulfills the bargain I ask of him.”

The magic settled around them, a tightening of bonds that Harry could feel like bared swords brushing his skin. Dumbledore's magic was mighty. It would insure that he kept his promise.

Harry nodded slowly. “And what is this bargain?”

“Something, I think, that will increase your capacity for love and forgiveness, and therefore increase your capacity for defeating the Dark Lord,” said Dumbledore placidly. “A letter will come for you a few days after Halloween. It will be on parchment charmed to insure the absolute honesty of the person who writes the message. I will ask you to respond to it, and on the same kind of parchment; I have some that you may borrow. That is all. You must guarantee that you will receive and read the letter, and that you will then respond. I will ask

for no promises of further communication, even if the letter-writer does reply to you. Just one.”

Harry swallowed. He suspected more under the surface—of course he did, this was Dumbledore—but he couldn’t deny how attractive the proposal sounded. Just one letter, and Dumbledore would vote the way Harry wanted.

Just one. How hard could it be? And if it’s honest, then I know that I’m not engaging in yet another fruitless political dance.

“I accept,” he whispered.

Dumbledore beamed at him. “Excellent, my boy! That is all I wanted to say. Did you have any questions to ask?”

He paused solicitously, but Harry shook his head. He hadn’t foreseen this danger, and now it was averted, with so small a sacrifice.

What other dangers do I need to watch out for? What other small sacrifices might I make to insure good results?

Harry went back to the Slytherin common room, though he wasn’t tired any more. Now he had to wonder what else he might have missed.

Albus closed his eyes as Harry left. A simple enough thing, but it meant so much, to him and to the one who would write the letter—and it would mean even more to Harry in the future, though at first it might be hard.

He does need to experience more love and forgiveness than he has right now. He is becoming nearly a mindless machine, thinking only of surviving from one duty to the next. He needs to learn to love and reconcile with the most important people in his life. Severus is important, of course, but secondary.

Albus could not give Harry the support he would need—the boy would never trust him if he tried, anyway—but he could bring in someone who would.

Harry will thank me for this at the end of the year, I'm sure of it.

Interlude: The Sea in Storm

The Sanctuary

October 27th, 1994

Dear Harry:

I know you're probably surprised to hear from me, and wondering what in the world I'm doing sending a letter to you now, when I haven't written in months. Well, I'll answer that question first, and then explain the other things you'll need to know.

I'm coming to Hogwarts on Halloween to see you. I'm not coming alone, so don't worry that I'll get captured by Aurors the moment I step out of my hiding place. One of my hosts will be coming with me. She feels the need to see you, and she thinks that she and the others have managed to weaken my phoenix web enough that you can safely remove the final remnants of it.

As to where I've been...well, the problem with this is mostly the language that I need to use to explain matters to you. I can call my hosts Seers, because they are, but that doesn't mean the same thing that it does when applied to a charlatan like Trelawney. They don't See the future, and they don't make prophecies, except educated guesses based on knowledge of human character and intelligence. They See the present, and the true state of human souls. I think the best term I've heard is clairvoyant, although even that has other meanings.

You see why this is confusing.

Most of the Seers find it hard to be around wizards or Muggles or magical creatures all the time; they can travel freely for a few months or years, and then they have to retreat, or their Sight would overwhelm them with all the information they're receiving. So they created the Sanctuary, which is a retiring place for Seers, and sometimes other people who have deep problems influencing their minds and souls. They surrounded it with shadows of their own creation that owls have a hard time finding their way through, and

which slow down those who try to approach, long enough for the Seers to judge if they're safe. They've lifted the shadows briefly so that my owl can get to Hogwarts before Halloween. They don't consider it fair that you should have no warning of what's coming.

These Seers have a gift of absolute honesty, Harry, and thus absolute Light. One of them met me while I was spying among the Death Eaters, saw that I was not actually as dark of soul as I pretended to be, and realized why I was pretending in the first place. She offered me the peace of the Sanctuary if I was ever able to get away. That is the invitation I accepted when I left you last May, and the months here have done me more good than I can say. I am ready to come back into the world, see you again, and have the phoenix web taken off. The Seers can heal the soul, but not the more intricate portions of the mind.

As for why one of them wants to come and See you—well, they've felt the rumors of your magic even here, and we do get news, if a few weeks after everyone else in the wizarding world. They've heard of what's happened with you and Dumbledore, with you and Snape, and with you and your father. They are concerned about what impact this has had on your soul. A powerful wizard with a broken soul is not good news for anyone. The Seer who will come with me, Vera, is the same one who Saw me among the Death Eaters all those years ago, and she is rested enough after months here to make the journey again with open eyes. She is personally curious about you, since she's listened to the tales I've spun of you, and I assure you she will be sympathetic. She will not lie, however. That is anathema to any Seer.

Oh, yes, I almost forgot to mention this, in my haste to get the owl away—Remus is here as well. He has told me the story of his parting with James. He showed James the note that you sent with the antidote to the insanity potion in all innocence, thinking that James would be pleased to know his son had taken the step of healing him. James seized it and used it as evidence, and told the Aurors that Remus would testify against Snape, too. Remus argued with him, couldn't persuade him to take that back, and left. We're reconciled, in a way. Ours is a tentative sort of friendship, but even I can see that Remus needs to recover from the hold his wolf has on his soul, and I

don't have any Seers' gifts. We talk and spend a little time together every day. There's no point in rushing it. He needs more healing still, though, so he won't come with me and Vera.

I know that you have other commitments on Halloween, more than likely. If Vera and I arrive when someone else is there, we are more than willing to wait. A newly recovered Seer tends to be proof against most people who might want to hurt her.

I'll see you soon, Harry. And don't even bother to write back telling me that it's dangerous for me to come or that you don't need anyone to look at you. No, it's not, and yes, you do. We're coming.

In hope,

Peter Pettigrew.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Inviting Someone Dangerous to Tea

“And there. It’s done.”

Harry blinked as the potion gave a final slow roil and turned black. Draco was right. It was finished. He could see the compulsion that twined about Draco’s neck and shoulders shudder, once, as though someone had fed it more than it could bear. Then it cracked and fell away.

Draco blinked and touched his shoulder briefly, as though he had felt something brush it. Then he glanced at Harry. “I can hardly wait to use it,” he said. His face was dreamy. “Can you imagine, Harry? Everyone gave up hope on my being a magical heir to my family, except for my father, and that was only because he wanted to deny the truth. But now everyone will have no choice but to accept it.” He carefully slid the black liquid from the cauldron into a vial he had standing ready. Since Snape was gone, and Dumbledore remained in his own office, there was no one to see or care if Harry and Draco ducked in and out of Snape’s potions lab and borrowed his equipment. “I’ll be an heir after tomorrow.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, his joy at the cracking of the web fading. “Draco. Tomorrow is Halloween.”

Draco blinked at him. “It is?” he asked, and then snorted. “Of course, it is, Harry. I hadn’t forgotten.”

“But you promised your mother that you wouldn’t use the potion on Halloween,” Harry reminded him. He couldn’t believe Draco had forgotten, any more than he’d really forgotten the date, but he might have hoped Harry wasn’t remembering that.

Draco opened his mouth once, then turned away and concentrated on the black, stirring potion.

“Draco.”

Draco stared at him sullenly over his shoulder. “I want to use it, Harry,” he said. “You know that Halloween’s my best chance of

summoning a ghost, any ghost, and this potion should break down any barriers that still exist.”

“You promised your mother that you wouldn’t.” Harry folded his arms and stared Draco down. “And now I want you to promise me.”

Draco gnawed at his lip.

“I don’t want to make you swear an oath,” said Harry. “Please, Draco. Just promise me. Just give me your word. It’s dangerous. I know that spell doesn’t talk about all the consequences of the potion.” It certainly never mentioned that you would have a compulsion to brew the damn thing. “Say that you won’t summon Julia Malfoy or drink the potion or offer her the potion.”

Draco attempted to look coy. Or maybe that was cunning, Harry thought. His friend’s face hadn’t worn his normal expressions in so long that it would take Harry time to learn them again. “What will you give me if I do promise?” he wheedled.

“Nothing,” said Harry. “This isn’t a bargain. This is for your own safety, Draco. I want you safe.”

Draco kicked the cauldron.

“Promise me, Draco,” said Harry.

Draco bowed his head, but Harry could hear his rebellious mutter. “What do you care? You’ll be in your formal meeting with my parents and other dangerous Dark wizards, anyway. And I can’t attend that meeting because I’m not a magical heir.” He spat the last words, then glared at Harry through a strand of hair. “Don’t you see why this is important to me? I thought you did, after I explained it.”

Harry rubbed his face with one hand. The Many snake on his arm hissed. “We could blind him. Then he would have no choice but not to use the potion.”

“You be quiet,” Harry told it, and faced Draco again. “I do understand,” he said, trying to make his voice soothing. “I do. But, as

you pointed out, I'll be busy in this formal meeting." And that other one, too, with Peter and the Seer. Harry still didn't plan to let the Seer actually look at him, but he would meet with Peter and take his phoenix web off. "I want to be with you when you use the potion. Please, Draco, promise me you'll wait."

Draco stared at nothing for long minutes. Harry waited, not knowing if he would have to make another argument or not.

Draco let out a windy sigh. "All right," he said at last, most ungraciously. "I promise."

Harry smiled and clasped his hand. He was startled when Draco used the hold to pull him into a hug, but not displeased. "Thank you," he whispered. "I knew I could trust you."

Draco's arms tightened almost convulsively around him, as though he knew what Harry was not saying. I can trust almost no one else. Harry knew he was annoying his Housemates. His fingers tapped on his legs, his feet tapped under the table, and his wand all but tapped inside his sleeve.

He couldn't help it. He was nervous. The Great Hall was fuller than he had ever seen it, crowded with the students of the other two wizarding schools, who had arrived that afternoon. Harry had got over his temptation to stare at them early on, though the silvery hair of the part-Veela students from Beauxbatons had drawn his attention, and the thick furs of the Durmstrang students. Madame Maxime, from Beauxbatons, was very obviously part-giant, and Karkaroff, the Headmaster of Durmstrang, made Harry's scar bristle and itch when he walked past. So he might be a former Death Eater, Harry thought. They were all the kind of things that he would have to remember.

But, right now, he was more worried about other former Death Eaters who should be arriving at the school soon, by which method he didn't know. It was Halloween night.

"Good evening, students."

Harry concealed his groan. Dumbledore was rising to make a speech. From the sound of translation spells going into effect, at least he would only make it once, but that meant that the food would be later in coming, and perhaps Harry would miss the arrival of his allies. Lucius had said in his last letter that they would meet “after dinner,” but that was taking normal Hogwarts dining habits into account.

“I am most pleased to welcome our fellow wizarding schools to Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament,” said Dumbledore, his eyes shining in what Harry thought was a maniacal fashion. Of course, he was on edge. Harry took a deep breath and told himself to relax. Even Draco was staring calmly at the Headmaster, and no longer looked agitated at the thought that he might have to wait to use his potion. If he could be serene, then Harry could be. “It is a grand tradition that has been neglected for too many years. I realize that I have not explained much about the Tournament, so I shall do that, that all of our students, even those who are not participating in the Tasks, may understand what is at stake.”

Harry groaned under his breath and looked around for distraction. There was none. Everyone else looked interested in what Dumbledore was saying, and the lack of food on the plates wouldn't let him occupy himself with eating.

Millicent poked him, and hissed at him to sit up straight and stop embarrassing Slytherin. Harry turned his gaze back reluctantly to the head of the Hall. He didn't know what was wrong with him. Normally, it would have been no trouble to conceal his true feelings and let matters fall out however they would.

Perhaps it was lack of time to relax, he considered. He'd spend the last few days wondering what the meeting with Peter and the Seer would be like, and how he could convince Vera not to look at him. That was on top of helping Draco finish up his potion, and managing a few additional lessons, both privately with Connor and with many of the younger students attending, and trying to get Connor to tell him what he was arguing with James about (unsuccessfully; his twin had proven close-mouthed on that point). The dreams about Voldemort, which had made his scar bleed every night this week, hadn't helped, either.

He couldn't collapse, though. It wasn't allowed. He forced himself to listen to what Dumbledore was saying as if it were the most important thing in the world.

"...three champions, one from each school. The champions shall be chosen by means of the Goblet of Fire, which considers the names submitted to it and selects the most worthy. These students will have to be intelligent, creative, and flexible, as they will be participating in three dangerous Tasks." Dumbledore smiled as a wave of gasps swept the tables. "Not impossible, I assure you, but they are dangerous.

"Each student is judged by a panel that includes both interested and impartial wizards. They will award a certain number of points for completing the Task, but also for how the student completes the Task, and the skill and character the completion demonstrates. The student with the largest number of points after the completion of all three Tasks wins the Tournament, a thousand Galleons, and honor and glory for his or her school."

The murmurs were more excited now. Harry frowned at the students who were discussing the Tournament; it even sounded as if some of the Slytherins had fallen victim to that nonsense about honor and glory. I wonder what's more attractive? The purse or the fame? The purse, I hope. Fame is not all that comfortable, and certainly nothing that someone should risk his life for.

"Our visiting students will join our students in classes for observations," Dumbledore concluded serenely, "but have their own assignments and own lesson plans owed from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. We wish to give them the experience of a Hogwarts education, but not to demand that they drop their own lives completely, of course!" He smiled, and some of the students dutifully chuckled. Harry shot a longing glance at the doors of the Great Hall, and wondered if his allies were arriving now.

"And that is all I have to say." Dumbledore clapped his hands, and the food finally, finally appeared on their plates. "May you have a pleasant feast!"

Harry heard the translation spells repeating Dumbledore's words in French and a mixture of Eastern European languages. He wasted no time in starting to eat, though Millicent's elbow in his ribs once again forced him to slow down. His mind sped up gradually, but this time it felt smoother, the way he had organized and arranged things when Snape and Draco had first changed on him. He had much to do, but he could manage it, if he thought like this.

"What is the matter with you?"

Harry jumped a bit when Millicent hissed in his ear, but then relaxed. After all, she was her father's magical heir, and had told him, rather abruptly that afternoon, that she would be attending the meeting with him. "I just don't want to miss the meeting," he breathed back at her.

Millicent narrowed her eyes at him. Harry turned away from her gaze and concentrated on his dinner. The bread was rather dry, but he preferred it to letting Millicent see him too closely.

"You won't," she muttered at last. "They'll wait for us, if we are held up, but I don't think we will be." She took a dainty bite of her own food, a French dish Harry didn't recognize, before she went on. "And it isn't just that. I haven't been looking, but, Merlin, Harry, you look awful. What's the matter?"

"What isn't the matter?" Harry cut himself off before he could step into a tirade, though. He was not about to burden Millicent with his own problems. "No, I'm sorry. I just haven't been sleeping well lately." It not only happened to be true, it was a great all-purpose excuse.

Millicent chewed thoughtfully at her bread, as if to demonstrate how someone should eat it, and then shook her head. "It's not just that. Or not only that. Come on, Harry, spill."

Harry raised his eyebrows and returned to his dinner. "There's nothing to spill, as you put it, Millicent."

"Yes, there is."

Harry ignored her for the rest of the meal, thought she managed to come up with taunts and indignant queries that he would ordinarily have responded to. She was getting angry, he saw, when they stood up to leave. Good. That meant she would be more likely to mistake his reactions for something other than what they were, and would be preoccupied with her own emotions.

He did not want people to worry about him. If they worried, they would ask questions, and Harry had too many secrets to hide. Besides, if they worried, they might offer comfort, and he might be too weak to prevent himself from taking it.

The meal done with, they filed out of the Great Hall. Most of the talk Harry could hear was about the Triwizard Tournament, and he shook his head and snorted. Things like that mattered so little in the grand scheme. Why was everyone so concerned about it?

Then he forced himself calm again. They're concerned about it because it matters to them, Harry. And it doesn't really matter if it doesn't matter to you, or you don't think it important. They do. You can hardly dictate what other people value.

His breathing eased, and he turned his head and caught Millicent's eye. Millicent nodded, and they slipped away from the rest of the Slytherins, slowly enough that no one else noticed them go, except Draco, who murmured, "Have fun," in a tone that smacked of jealousy.

Harry sighed. Well, we'll use his potion and see what happens soon enough—when taking proper precautions.

Millicent led the way to the Room of Requirement, looking over her shoulder with a frown now and again to make sure Harry was following. Harry licked his lips as they came nearer and nearer the place. "How were they going to get in?" he whispered to Millicent's back.

Millicent shrugged. "Dad said that Starborn had found out some ways past the wards from the Dark Lord's minions, including one of them that got on the grounds last year."

Fenrir Greyback, Harry's mind supplied at once. He shivered, even as his concern grew. He hoped that Narcissa had dropped her contact with the committed Death Eaters and her attempts to convince them that she might be interested in allying with them. Remembering the wound on her arm, though, he doubted it.

They reached the Room of Requirement. A door was already visible. Millicent nodded at nothing in particular, then turned and met Harry's eyes. "Ready, Potter?"

Harry cocked his head. She almost never called him by his last name anymore. "Of course," he said. "Unless you know something I don't, and this is really just an attempt to kidnap me and drain me of my magic."

"Not all of us are the Minister." Millicent's voice was extremely dry. "No, I just meant whether you were ready to enter a room full of suspicious Dark wizards experienced in detecting deception, especially since you seem so determined to prevent anyone from asking questions about you."

Shit. She wasn't distracted, after all. Harry lifted his chin. Well, I know how to deal with this. I've danced harder patterns. "No one will have to ask questions like that, because no one has to worry about my health," he said calmly.

Millicent sneered at him and turned away. As she opened the door, which was made of some thick black wood that Harry didn't recognize, he took the chance to cast some wandless glamours on himself. He couldn't hide everything, but he could conceal the deepest shadows beneath his eyes and the agitation that might reveal itself in the small lines about his mouth.

Just a sacrifice I have to make if I want to dance with wizards like this. The Room of Requirement had shaped itself into a comfortable enough place, Hawthorn supposed. There were enough chairs for all of them, including Potter and Millicent when they arrived. The seats themselves were plush, either deep green or black, and circled around a hearth blazing with warm light. The walls themselves were

white wood, whorled with so many delicate designs that Hawthorn kept looking up and thinking she saw the Parkinson crest among them. Of course, the others probably saw the crests or mottos of their own families.

She sat in one chair, acutely feeling the absence at her side. She would have thought Dragonsbane would come with her this night of all nights, wanting to meet with Potter, but he had only said that it would not be proper, and she hadn't been prepared to argue with him. He saw the future, including the deaths of anyone who came near him. It was extremely hard to argue with him.

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy sat together on a divan beside her, sideways to the hearth, speaking together in soft voices. Hawthorn could not be sure if they were conducting an argument or not. She sniffed, and then smiled. Both of them smelled determined, which told her nothing, really.

Nearest the fire on the right side of the circle were Adalrico and Elfrida. Elfrida was five months gone in pregnancy now, but that did not mean she looked the worse for wear, as many witches did. She was puellaris, and she had given up much that she might have had for the sake of protecting her children. Her face was radiant, and whenever Adalrico said something that might relate to children, she would respond in a spirited snap. Hawthorn fully approved. The birth of pureblood children was rare enough. It was good that this one had a powerful mother protecting her.

On the left side of the circle, Arabella Zabini took a whole couch for herself, her hair tightly braided with silver pins that left no doubt about her Songstress status. Hawthorn met the other witch's eyes and exchanged a small, guarded nod. Arabella had never been a Death Eater, and had never seemed to care about much beyond studying and raising her son and making herself beautiful—and singing, of course, but that was part of her magic and the result of her study. Hawthorn had no idea why she had really agreed to come to this meeting, nor what benefit there might be in it for her.

Close beside Arabella's couch sat a hunched figure, covered in a dark cloak. Hawthorn did her best to ignore her. She smelled wrong. She was wrong. None of them could actually deny Acies Lestrangle the right to come to a meeting like this, but it still made Hawthorn uncomfortable.

The door of the Room opened then, and Potter and Millicent stepped inside. Hawthorn found herself shifting forward before she realized what she was doing. She realized that she had missed Potter's magic, which draped itself over the room in a purring carpet of song and strength. Hawthorn shook her head. I could get addicted so easily.

It had been like this with the Dark Lord, too, at least when she had first met him, but he had changed sharply not long afterward. Harry did not smell as if he would change. Besides, the pull of his magic was entirely unselfconscious, without the edge of the compulsion to it that always rode Voldemort's power. He moved through the world, wild and glorious, before he commanded anyone to do anything about that moving.

Hawthorn took a deep sniff, trying to pull in more of that magic.

She narrowed her eyes when she realized what she was smelling underneath the scent of power. Stress, fatigue, aching weariness, the way that she smelled herself when she'd been up for all three full moon nights. The boy looked fine, particularly given that the only light in the Room was the low radiance of the fire, but he smelled as if he should have been on edge, ready to snap or collapse.

Hawthorn leaned back on the couch and slowly brought her fingers together. I would not like him to collapse. He is our ally, and a powerful wizard besides.

Perhaps there is something I can do.

Harry relaxed when he saw the people in the room. They were all ones he had met at least once, though Arabella Zabini's sharp, inquisitive eyes were almost a stranger's to him.

No. Wait.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the cloaked figure on the furthest chair. "Who is she?" he asked, not realizing until the words were out of his mouth that his magic had already identified the cloaked figure as female.

The witch shifted, and then stood. Her voice was so low and rough that Harry could easily have mistaken her sex. "My name is Acies Lestrangle." Harry snarled and twitched his wand into his hand, but the witch shook her head calmly. "No. You need not prepare to defend yourself. Rodolphus and Rabastan are distant cousins to me. I am not an heir of the true line, only of a small one. I was never a Death Eater. But I did want to meet you."

Harry let out a small breath. "All right," he said. "Why?"

"Will you permit me to look at you?" Acies lifted a hand to the hood of her cloak. "Meeting my gaze is rather uncomfortable, but it will explain more than words ever could. Indeed," she added, with a hint of humor to her words for the first time, "without this gaze, I don't think that you would believe my story. And since you are vates, I feel some kinship to you already."

Harry blinked. Almost no one knew he was vates. "Who are you?"

"This," said Acies, and dropped her hood.

Harry met her eyes, but they weren't a human pair of eyes. They blazed at him, and heat swept over his body as though the fire had come out of the hearth. Harry felt wind follow after the fire, and then a steady roaring invaded his ears. His braced legs kept him from collapsing to the floor, but it was a near thing. He ground his teeth as singing similar to the music he had heard at Grimmauld Place arose, though he was sure Acies had not opened her mouth since those initial words.

Then the sensations stopped. Harry looked up to see that Acies had put on her hood again.

“What was that?” Harry whispered. His own voice shook. He attempted to push the shock away and master himself, but it was harder than he had expected. Only the full moon night he had run through the Forest and the dark gate he had gone through on Walpurgis Night rivaled what he had just experienced in wildness.

“You will believe me now, I think,” said Acies. “One of my ancestors grew obsessed with breeding magical creature blood and abilities into our line. However, there are relatively few magical creatures whom wizards can breed with any ease. When he had secured those abilities for his children, he went after the ones we could not physically breed with.” Acies chuckled, and Harry was not surprised to smell smoke rising when she did. “He could not, despite the experiments he tried, actually mate any of his relatives to those creatures, but he could and did link their minds, in effect exchanging their thoughts. All but one of his daughters died of the shock. She lived, and she had children, and some of us have had thoughts like that creature’s forever after. A small part of us is them.”

“And what was the creature?” Harry asked.

“A dragon, Mr. Potter,” said Acies, calmly. “Wildest of all magical creatures. I have sensed what you are moving towards, and I have seen you from a distance. I wanted to see you close, that I might know if you really are the vates that we have been waiting for, or merely another lie. You have met my gaze, and proven that you are what your magic’s beacon claimed. Thank you.” She stepped back and sat down in her chair again. “I consider myself your ally now. The monies of my part of the Lestrangle family, and any help that I might personally give, are at your disposal.”

Harry blinked, and blinked again. The contact with her gaze had unexpectedly refreshed him, made him feel freer than he had in some time, and he had won another ally, it seemed, for a very small price. “Thank you,” he said, unsteadily, and then turned and faced Arabella Zabini, who reclined beside Acies. “My lady Songstress. Why have you come?”

Arabella smiled gently at him. "I wanted you to know, Mr. Potter," she said, in that deep, thrilling voice, "that I have books you might be interested in, books written in Parseltongue."

Harry blinked. "How did you acquire them?" He wondered if all of them had planned this together, to further unsettle him, but he did not think so.

"Now, Mr. Potter." Arabella inclined her head and peered up at him between her lashes. "A lady never reveals all her secrets. Suffice it to say that I have them. I will be willing to give you one of them in return for a promise from you. A simple promise, of course, and one that I think you would probably give anyway, but one I want to be sure of. I have no intention of tying myself to someone who will act against my interests."

Harry frowned at her. "You weren't a Death Eater."

"But I am a Dark witch," said Arabella softly. "Both declared to the Dark and someone who uses Dark magic, Mr. Potter. Studying song the way I have is not something the Ministry approves of, because my songs can be used to persuade others of many things, truth only one of them. I want your promise that you will never declare yourself a Light Lord. We have had enough trouble with Dumbledore on that front. As long as I know that you won't become another threat like that, then I am hardly going to require that you declare any other formal allegiance. Only what you won't. It is true that you do not aspire to be like him?" Her eyes shone like Blaise's when she was in a passion, Harry realized. Otherwise, she looked largely different, both more alive and darker of skin than Blaise was.

"I do not aspire to be like him," said Harry. This, he could say in a steady voice. "It would be death to my ambitions as vates. No, by Merlin and my magic, I never aspire to become a Light Lord."

Arabella smiled as though someone had just offered to kiss her hand. "Very good, Mr. Potter," she said. "I shall send the book in a few days. That is all I wanted to ask of you."

Harry nodded, and then turned towards Adalrico and Elfrida. Millicent, who had seated herself beside her parents, started to say something, but her mother was already speaking, eyes shining with a strength that Harry had not thought she possessed.

“Mr. Potter,” said Elfrida, her hands cradled around her belly, “I have come to ask you to extend your formal alliance with my family to the babe I carry.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Mrs. Bulstrode,” he said, “I would have done that without your asking, just as I assume you would have considered yourself allies of any younger sibling or cousin I might have. Why do you feel the need to ask for more of it?”

Elfrida smiled at him. Harry caught his breath as he saw how it transformed her face, shading it with a glow of white-gold magic. Merlin, I wonder what exactly she looks like when she’s defending her children. “Because,” she said with supreme confidence, “the world will change when you rise to power. I know it. I would have my second daughter know that magic from the moment of her birth. I would like to ask you to attend her birth and spare what attention you can to her over the years, so that she never grows up with the cringing mixture of fear and awe that too many other wizards have around strong magic.” She did not look at Adalrico, but Harry saw him flinch anyway. “Millicent is as old as you are, so she had no chance to know you as Marian will. She will live in the future you craft. Will you do this? I know Marian is only one among many wizarding children whom you will affect, but she is one of only a few who might grow up without that fear that has ruined so many things about our world.”

Harry could feel his eyes soften. Elfrida was right. Fear had controlled too much of the way everyone related to powerful wizards, from the way that Death Eaters followed Voldemort to the way that his mother and Dumbledore had tried to control him. “Of course I will do it,” he said quietly. “I am honored. Mrs. Bulstrode, and I wish that all mothers were as dedicated to their children as you are.”

Elfrida gave him a smile of breathtaking sweetness, and sat down again. Adalrico just coughed in embarrassment when Harry looked at

him. "I was here just in case you refused," he muttered. "But you didn't."

Harry snorted back at him, and turned to face the Malfoys. Narcissa gave him a faint smile. "I came here to see how you were, Harry," she said. "How are you?"

Ah. Harry should have known that Narcissa was probably the hardest challenge he would face in this room. She had been concerned about him the other weekend, after all. "Very well, Mrs. Malfoy," he said.

Millicent coughed.

Narcissa leaned forward, her eyes narrowed. "Is that true?" she asked. "Harry, I know that you have an unusually low amount of concern for yourself, but you should not. I know you are reluctant to speak on personal grounds, so I will talk about our alliance instead. If you run yourself to death trying to be vates and protector for everyone, then you cannot help us. Remember that."

Harry relaxed. He knew how to deal with this, too. "Of course I remember that, Mrs. Malfoy," he said. "I would never do such a thing."

"Liar."

Harry jumped. The word did not come from Millicent, or even from Narcissa, who was watching him with utmost concern. It came from the chair where Hawthorn Parkinson rested. Harry looked at her, and found her eyes narrowed, her nose flexing as she sniffed.

Bloody glamours, Harry thought, as he frowned at her. Should have known they wouldn't fool a werewolf's nose. Why don't any of the books teach glamours to fool scent the way they do sight and sound?

"You smell nearly sick with stress and fatigue," Hawthorn said softly. "I assume that you have concealed the evidence, but I know that it is there. I would be surprised if it were not. My daughter has owed me about what you have been doing to try and save your guardian, and

the private lessons you have been holding, and many other things that would tax your time and patience.”

Bloody Pansy! Harry kept his expression calm with an effort. “Other people have already spoken to me about this, Mrs. Parkinson,” he said. “I promise, I am sleeping more, and one of my burdens has just been lifted from my shoulders.” Draco finished the potion, and his compulsion has lifted. Of course I’m happier. “I am alive to all that my duties demand of me. I will not fail you. I will swear that by any oath you like.”

“We’re more afraid that you’ll keep your promises to us but destroy yourself in the process, Harry,” said Narcissa softly, pulling his attention back to her. “I think it’s time for an arrangement like the one I know the Parkinsons and Bulstrodes employed last year. I will ask Draco to watch over you more closely.” She glanced at Hawthorn. “I am sure that Hawthorn could ask Pansy to do the same thing.”

“We’d be glad to do it,” said Millicent unexpectedly. “We already do, and owl our parents about you, Harry—“

Bloody Millicent. Harry gave her a glare that she ignored with supreme ease.

“But I think it’s time to actively interfere.” Millicent smiled serenely at him. “It won’t be too much trouble to make sure that you go to sleep on time and don’t wear yourself out, will it, Harry? After all, you yourself said that you’ve been trying to improve matters.”

“I don’t need minders,” said Harry, unable to keep silent any longer. He turned towards Lucius, who had sat silent through all this, watching him with a cool, assessing gaze. “Sir, you and I have been doing a truce-dance for nearly two years now,” he said quietly. “It will be complete come Yule. You would not have entered the dance with me if you did not think of me as an equal, would you? Not a child, not someone who needs minders.”

Lucius shook his head slowly, barely stirring his long hair. Harry relaxed. He had put Lucius on the spot, forcing him to claim equal status for Harry unless he wanted to impugn his own honor, but it had

worked. Surely the others would have to see that someone whom Lucius respected would keep his promises and was not in need of people to trail around after him.

"I trust you to complete the truce-dancer, Mr. Potter," said Lucius. "I came here merely to see if you intended to change your mind about giving me whatever gift I ask for come Yule."

Harry relaxed further. Lucius is predictable. Not safe, but Harry knew every step of this dance, and he could take part in it without feeling as though someone would suddenly turn on him. "No, sir," he said. "I promised that, in gratitude for all you've done for me—" he meant the permission to free Dobby—"and I do intend to keep that promise."

Lucius nodded. Then he smiled. Harry took a step backward. Lucius isn't supposed to smile like that.

"That said," Lucius murmured, "it would do me no good at all if you collapsed, as you did the Christmas we began the truce-dance, and spent the day in the hospital wing. I do not fancy receiving my gift from an ally who cannot stand. It would make me look weak. I suggest that you let your friends watch over you, Mr. Potter. There is no shame in such a thing. All the greatest wizards have had such close guards around them." His eyes flashed for a moment, and his right hand twitched, as if he would touch the Dark Mark hidden on his left arm. "Their relationship to them has been defined by their own souls. The Dark Lord did—what he did. Dumbledore treats no one as an equal, but manipulates them all. Given that you have resolved never to be a Light Lord, and to help others around you, I should think an arrangement of mutual aid would be agreeable to everyone involved."

Harry stiffened. His mind raced in circles again, for just a moment.

I'm not going to be able to get out of this.

Then he forced his breathing smooth, and told himself it could have been worse. So more people were looking at him, instead of no one. It did not mean he had to let them see the truth. No one would find out what Lily and James had done. He would make sure of that. No

one had to accompany him to all his meetings with the magical creatures in the Forest, either; Harry could point out that they wouldn't trust another wizard or witch, and force his minders to stay behind. He was already watched in the lessons. He could use magic to keep business like this letter he had to write a few days after Halloween private.

The hardest thing to hide is going to be the nightmares, he thought, particularly if they've got Blaise and Draco watching me. But I need practice on glamours and illusions, anyway.

He met Lucius's eyes and nodded. "If you concur, sir, then I'll trust your judgment."

He saw the surprise on Hawthorn's face, and Narcissa's, before they hid it. Harry managed to dredge up a smile for them.

They aren't going to see anything I don't want them to see. I'm more worried about convincing this Vera that she doesn't really need to look at me.

"Did anyone need anything else?" he asked, wondering if the meeting could conclude now and he could go meet with Peter and the Seer. Hawthorn leaned back in her seat and listened to her allies deny that they needed anything else. She, too, shook her head when Harry looked inquiringly at her. She had come along simply to see what the others wanted and to renew her ties with Harry, if they needed renewing.

You're thinking of him as Harry now, you realize.

She did realize that, but there was little to be done about it, she thought. She was growing closer to the child than she would have believed possible, given that he was so powerful. Being a Death Eater had never been like this, could never be like this.

And he seemed determined to destroy himself before letting anyone else suffer. Protect and defend and serve, the words Narcissa had written to him, and he seemed to have taken them to heart more

completely than anyone Hawthorn had ever known of, or even read of in history.

Even with the victory they had won, Hawthorn thought they had lost something. She could smell Harry's determination, and knew that he probably intended to hide himself even better than he had been.

I might be able to do something about that, she thought. He cannot be as good at facing a "threat" of help he does not know is coming.

After all, if he is so dedicated to us, the least we can do is be dedicated to him in return, and catch him when he falls, the way he would catch us.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: What Light is Like

Harry stepped out of the Room of Requirement, and realized abruptly that Peter hadn't said where he and Vera would meet him. Well, it will have to be somewhere outside the school, at least, since I think Dumbledore still has those wards up to prevent Peter from entering.

He took the wand out from his pocket and murmured, "Point Me Peter Pettigrew."

The wand spun once, then pointed steadily towards the school's front doors. Harry nodded and took a step to follow it.

Millicent's hand grasped his shoulder, pulling him to a halt. "Where do you think you're going, Harry?" she asked, with false cheeriness. "You said that you'd been trying to sleep better lately. I think you would sleep better if you returned to our common room, instead of traipsing around the halls."

Harry gritted his teeth and jerked hard, a twisting motion that his mother had taught him for when an enemy had hold of him. It worked now, and Millicent's hand fell away. "I have another meeting," he hissed at her. Her eyes had gone wide as she watched him, the first time Harry had seen them do so. "I don't need you to accompany me everywhere, and I certainly don't need you interfering with those things that I've promised other people I'd do."

Millicent merely watched him go. Harry wondered if she planned an interrogation for when he returned to Slytherin, or had just decided there was nothing she could do for right now. It was too much to hope that she would really never try to delay him or interfere again.

Harry ducked past patrolling prefects and Professors, shading himself with a Disillusionment Charm when he needed to. The great doors of Hogwarts were still open, and he stepped outside. He did force himself to pause and draw the sweet air of the outdoors into his lungs.

Well, perhaps not that sweet, after all, he thought with a grimace, as the rich horsey smell of the giant beasts that pulled the Beauxbatons carriage came to him.

Harry turned and swept the lawn in front of him with his eyes, where the wand pointed, but could see nothing. Of course, Peter was probably a rat, and he wouldn't be able to see Harry under the Charm anyway. Harry shook his head and dropped the Charm, then called, "Peter?" as loudly as he dared.

Movement shimmered off to the left, and Harry saw the flash of a gray rat running close to the ground—a motion he'd learned to identify easily after last year. The rat sat up briefly as if to groom its whiskers, and motioned to him with one paw. Harry smiled and followed.

Peter led him along the wall of the castle towards Gryffindor Tower and out of immediate sight of the front doors before he changed back. Then he spent a moment shuffling and adjusting his limbs before he faced Harry and held out his hand.

"Peter," said Harry, as he clasped the hand. "You look well."

And he did. His face was no longer as thin and as haunted as it had been last year, and his blue eyes were bright with good humor. Just a short time of living away from the Dementors and the Aurors hunting him had made a difference, Harry thought. Even his smile was slower, deeper, warmer.

"Harry," said Peter. "Yes, I am feeling better—even better now that I can see you. The Sanctuary's a remarkable place. Rest there is true rest, without the ashy feeling of too many snatched hours of sleep that I'd been having before I went. The Seers know exactly what kind of light you need, the number of cushions that are comfortable on your bed, when you're suffering from bouts of fear or dreamlessness, and one of them is usually awake to talk to. The Sanctuary has no normal night and day, surrounded by its shadows as it is." Peter gave a dreamy smile. "I never thought I could like an enclosed space after Azkaban, but I was wrong."

Harry could feel himself relaxing, both at the obvious joy and peace in Peter's voice, and the fact that there was no Seer around yet. "Where is Vera?" he asked, to make sure.

"She'll be along in a while," said Peter, and then smiled at him. "I'm almost completely healed. But the phoenix web is still there. Since it's a web, and you're well on your way to becoming vates, they thought you could break it."

Harry blinked, wondering how Peter had known about his progress towards becoming vates, and then remembered that Peter had said Remus had come to the Sanctuary. Of course. He'd be able to tell him about my breaking the web of his Obliviate. "I'll try," said Harry. "But if I'm hurting you, then you'll have to tell me. I still haven't broken many webs."

Peter chuckled. "I made my pain known last year whenever it happened, Harry," he said, sitting down. "I've only learned to be more honest in the Sanctuary. Come, I give you permission to use Legilimency on me."

Harry nodded and took Peter's head between his hands. Peter gazed back at him trustingly. That gave Harry much more confidence than he otherwise would have to lean near and murmur, "Legilimens."

The familiar sensation of wind sweeping him forward caught him up, and then he hovered in a place entirely unfamiliar to him. Peter's mind last year had looked like Azkaban, down to dirty gray walls and long corridors filled with locked cells.

This place was white, and opulent in a way that made it seem like a true home, with arched doorways and doors that stood half-open as if inviting a visitor inside. Harry could see glittering treasures beyond the doors that he supposed made up Peter's most recent memories. Others lay further back, in shadow, but that didn't seem to matter as much; Peter would probably share them if Harry just coaxed him a bit. The light came from no visible source, but sparkled on off-white pillows and cream-colored divans and many other pale shades that varied enough to never become monotonous. Harry wondered if Peter had modeled his mind after the Sanctuary, or if it was just the natural influence of the place creeping in. Either way, his words about how peaceful it was there rang even truer now.

The one thing out of place in all that white was the phoenix web, a harsh, ugly golden spider crouched on one of the divans. Harry frowned at it and strode towards it, one hand extended.

“You need to leave,” he told it.

He received a clacking, hissing refusal in return, and the web curled up, demonstrating its mastery of the one part of Peter’s mind it could still hold. Harry shook his head and crouched over the web, studying it. It had a single tiny figure stuck in it. After a moment, he recognized it as a replica of himself.

Harry blinked, then nodded. Of course it would be. Peter broke free of Azkaban by focusing the web around a duty to protect and save me instead of a duty to protect and save his friends. It only makes sense that I’m an anchor for one corner of the damn thing.

Harry lowered his hand and put it on the web. The web hissed at him, and made as if to coil about his arm.

He summoned what he thought of as his vates mindset in retaliation. The web’s strands touching him withered and died. The golden thing trembled and gave a little warbling song of distress that might have changed Harry’s mind if he hadn’t heard the net in his head sing the same way.

“No,” he said. “You should never have been here at all. You certainly shouldn’t have lasted so long. You are going.”

He moved a step backward and wound his other hand into place. The web shone with desperate strength, shooting out a new tendril to curl around the back of the divan. Harry yanked to the side, and that tendril was forced to retract before it found an anchor. Harry closed his eyes.

He concentrated on the sound of true phoenix song, as he remembered it soothing him to sleep this summer, before the abduction and the Death Eaters and Snape’s arrest and the other parts of this mess. The song swelled in his imagination, clear and

pure, and overrode the whining dissonance the web was trying to use to protect itself.

In moments, the real song conquered the pretense, and then the web withered in his fingers. Harry opened his eyes to see that he held nothing more than a handful of golden dust, and the replica of himself had taken its place among the other memories somewhere in one of the white rooms, no more or less important than the rest—certainly no longer the purpose that Peter lived for.

Harry smiled, blew the dust carefully into the shadows so that it had no chance of forming as a web again, and stepped backward, sliding out of Peter's wonderfully warm and well-lit mind with a murmured word.

He opened his eyes, blinked a bit, and then met Peter's wondering gaze. Peter was feeling the side of his head as though someone had hit him with a hammer and then the lump had sunk again to become part of his skin.

"That feels—wonderful," he murmured. "Like freedom." He met Harry's eyes, and Harry was torn between pride and embarrassment at seeing awe in his face. "I never imagined it would be so easy."

Harry shrugged and turned slightly so that he wouldn't need to meet Peter's eyes. "It wouldn't have been, last year," he said. "I tore Remus's own web on his memories too swiftly, and let all the emotions flow back in. And the Seers must have weakened your web quite a bit. This one wasn't hard."

"Thank you for my freedom, Harry," said Peter. "And now, to the reason that I came." He sat down on the grass.

Harry turned to face him. "Don't you think we should get under shelter?" he asked.

Peter shook his head. "I don't believe that anyone else has reason to come here, and if they do, then you and I can both hide well enough." He laid emphasis on the word "hide" that Harry didn't understand, staring at him all the while.

Harry nodded slowly, perplexed. "And what do you mean, the reason you came?" he added, his ears finally delivering what they'd heard to his brain. "I thought you came to have the phoenix web removed."

"And to see you." Peter leaned forward, one hand washing over the other. "Harry, you can't just have absorbed all the blows you took in the last few months and gone on."

Harry blinked, mildly insulted that Peter would think that. "Of course I can," he said. "I was trained to be strong and resilient, and I've added more strength to that lately. I'm glad that you were concerned." That much was true. Knowing someone else still cared about him when his father, Snape, and Draco had turned odd mattered more than Harry wanted to admit. "But really, there's nothing to be worried about. I'm doing better, I promise. I have some hope that the Minister will be voted out of office and Snape will come home after his trial."

Peter just shook his head.

"What?" Harry had to swallow the shout he wanted to make. "What?" he repeated more insistently. "Did one of the Seers prophesize that Snape is never coming home?"

"They aren't that kind of Seer, Harry, remember?" Peter smiled at him, but there was something incredibly weary behind the expression. "They See the present, not the future. And no, my headshake has nothing to do with Snape, though he deserves a bite on the ankle if anyone does. I'm worried about you. What would you think of someone whom all of your experiences in these past few months had happened to? Would you really think that he was all right or doing better?"

Harry lifted his head. Here it comes again, he thought in irritation. At least I don't think he did bring the Seer the way he said he did. "Of course not," he said. "But those are most people. I'm me."

"Better than most people, then?" Peter's voice was extremely dry.

"Of course not."

“Stronger than they are?”

Harry shook his head, trying to convey what he really felt. The truest words were also the ones that other people tended to dismiss, because they didn't understand them like he did. “It's just—I don't know them from the inside out like I do myself,” he said, in sudden inspiration. “I wouldn't know for sure what they really felt. And if someone said that she wasn't afraid any more and then demonstrated signs of fear, I would suspect her of lying. But I know what I feel, and I feel fine. And I know that I can keep going.” He smiled at Peter. “I know that you said you trusted me last year, enough to reveal secrets to me that you'd carried for twelve years. Can't you trust me now? Can't you see that I'm fine?”

“You are most assuredly not fine, Harry,” said a light voice from behind him. “You have not been since you were a year and a half old.”

Harry shot to his feet, moving instinctively in front of Peter. Then he realized that Peter hadn't moved, hadn't started, hadn't seemed upset at all. He gave him a betrayed glance.

Peter stared back at him without remorse. “Vera wanted a chance to observe you from afar for a while, Harry,” he said. “Seers need only one glance to gather the truth of a human soul, but they need time to absorb it, to understand what they're Seeing. She agreed to remain back while you took the web off me.”

“You lied to me,” Harry snarled, his eyes tracking the progress of the short, plump witch walking towards them along the castle wall. She wasn't close enough for him to see her face yet, but he was sure it would wear an expression of concern—concern she would be better off spending elsewhere, concern that would reveal his deepest secrets if he let it, concern that would encourage him to weakness if he spent too much time around it. He backed away from Vera. “I trusted you, and you lied to me.”

Peter simply looked at him. “I didn't lie, Harry,” he said quietly. “I warned you we were both coming. I said that she would be along in a

while. I told you that Seers have a gift of absolute honesty, and absolute Light. I don't know why you thought you could hide from that, and frankly, I don't understand why you wish to. If you're going to be vates, then you should want to understand yourself. You won't have another opportunity to understand yourself like this."

Harry ground his teeth. Merlin, I hate this. He always hated the moments when two opposite obligations tugged at him.

If he did want to be vates, then yes, he should try to understand himself, and he had even said he would try in the Owlery on the vernal equinox, when his own phoenix web broke. And his doing what he could to free the magical creatures was important to so many people, even wizards. It was certainly not a set of principles or a duty that he wanted to abandon.

But he needed to keep others' secrets, too—most especially his parents'. If this Seer really had Seen everything, she would know about what Lily and James had done now. Harry didn't want that. He wondered, dismally, what the chances were that Seers were absolutely trusted witnesses in court, and wouldn't even be required to take Veritaserum to validate their testimony.

He turned to Vera as she came up to him, and inclined his head, not meeting her eyes. He wouldn't run away, but he didn't need to show politeness to her, either. "How do you do, ma'am?" he asked, deliberately keeping it to a mumble.

"Much better than you do," said Vera, and the sharp, crisp tones of her voice made Harry lift his head to look at her. Vera was a woman he could have passed in the streets of Hogsmeade without noticing. Her face was calm and ordinary, marked with wrinkles from laughter and frowning and squinting at parchments. Her eyes were deep brown, but not nearly as dark as Snape's. Her hair was brown and tied in a neat bun on the back of her head. There was no sign that she was someone who could just rip the secrets of another wizard's soul away from him.

"I don't know what you mean," said Harry, determined to bluff it out to the end. Perhaps, if I can show her just how much I don't want this,

then she'll give up and respect my privacy. "I've achieved several last things in the last little while that I'm very proud of. One of my friends has finally stopped being stupid. I've met with my allies and sent them home happy. I think I'm going to get my guardian back from the Ministry unharmed."

Vera heard him out, her hands folded. She was a solid presence. Harry was sure now that he could have passed her without noticing anything unusual about her, but at least she would have drawn his eye. She did not look as though any blow could rock her, or anything she had seen could ultimately shock her. Harry supposed that was a good characteristic for someone who went around peering into people's skulls and being a busybody about what she found there.

"You've achieved them all at costs to yourself," Vera said, when she seemed sure that he'd finished. "You've given up time and effort, which anyone might have done, but you've also agreed to answer a letter from someone whom you don't want to hear from again, and you've spent an awful lot of time lying to other people, haven't you? You don't want anyone to worry about you. Why is that? Why wouldn't someone who wore himself out in the service of others at least want that service understood and appreciated for what it is?"

"Shut up," said Harry, and then clamped his lips together. He hadn't meant to be that impolite, really he hadn't, but this—this was too much. He backed a step away from her, and felt Peter's hand close on his arm, light but undeniable.

"Harry," Peter murmured, "just listen to her. She was the one who convinced me that I wasn't evil for following the orders I was given out of love and a need to protect my friends. I remembered those words the whole time I was in Azkaban, and they were one of the things that gave me the courage to break out."

"I don't want her looking at me," said Harry.

"It's too late, Harry." Vera's voice was gentle. "I already have. And you don't want anyone looking at you, isn't that so? That conditioning of your mother's still lingers very strongly. You bounce attention from yourself to other people whom you think have worse problems. You

want everyone to look at Connor and not at you, even when you do something truly remarkable. You don't want anyone to see the immense load of secrets you're carrying, even when they almost break you."

Harry heard his own breath rushing out of his lungs in a frantic, awkward mess. He controlled the temptation to step back or bolt or do something else unfortunate. He had to brazen this out, especially if Vera already had all his secrets. He had to at least persuade her not to spread them any further.

"It wasn't her fault," he told Vera. "It was—it wasn't the best thing she could have done, but it was necessary, she thought, to protect Connor. I had to be hidden so that no one would notice me when they were making plans to take my brother down."

"And now?" Vera asked. "Now that you have accepted that your brother might not be the only one who needs protection, why do you insist on staying hidden? Your magic is very powerful, Harry. You could accomplish much if you acknowledged that and accepted the position of leader that others want to give you."

Harry bared his teeth. I can explain this, but they won't understand. "People are so wonderful," he told Vera. "And this already sounds stupid."

Vera simply raised her eyebrows. "I've already seen your justifications, Harry," she said. "Explain. I can promise, I won't tell you that it sounds stupid. Many other things in your soul have far less sense backing them, such as what your parents did to you." Her face darkened for the first time, and she narrowed her eyes. "I would like to look into their souls, if they were here, and see what this looks like to them. I am sure I would find some of the most cramped and twisted reasoning ever woven."

"Do you want to hear what I'm saying, or do you want to insult my parents?" Harry demanded.

"The first, of course," said Vera. "This is the first time you've ever really said this aloud, Harry. It's an event, I think."

Harry scowled at her. I know what I'm saying, and I'm the only one it should matter to. Why does it matter if others hear it or not? "People are so wonderful," he said steadily, and ignored the whining pulse in his head that reminded him how idiotic words like this sounded when he expressed them. "They have—they have their own souls, their own inner existences. It matters that they exist in the world. They're all beautiful, looked at in the right way. Even when they hurt other people, few of them are doing it just to hurt others, like Voldemort or Bellatrix Lestrange. They have their reasons. You can listen to those reasons and understand them.

"I want to protect them. I want to prevent people who hurt others from hurting them, of course, but I also want to forgive them, and find some way for them to go on living and forgive themselves, instead of just crumpling them up and putting them in Azkaban or someplace like that. Azkaban is such a waste. There's so much potential in someone like Snape, whom people would dismiss just because he was a Death Eater at one point, or Draco, whom someone might dismiss because of his name and his family's reputation, or Peter, whom everyone thought was a criminal." Harry looked hard at Vera, willing her to understand. "I think that most people can heal of the damage they've done themselves and come back and change again. No one ever stops changing until they're dead. And that means that everyone deserves as much freedom as possible, if they aren't damaging other people's freedom with it, so that they can make decisions as freely as possible. They should have lots of choices. They should have lots of paths. That applies to everyone. And my being a leader would cut paths off for people, because they would think they owed me obedience or something because of my power." Harry snorted and shook his head. "Power's only good if it's used to give people choices and paths, not if it's just—I don't know, tossed around and shaped into pretty lights."

Vera regarded him in silence for a long moment. Harry watched her back. She really did seem to understand, he thought, as the seconds passed in silence. He couldn't do anything about the secrets she'd already discovered, but perhaps, if one person really did understand what he believed...

Then Vera said softly, "Everyone, Harry? Everyone deserves that?"

Harry frowned. "Perhaps your Sight is deficient, then," he said. "Yes, everyone. Former Death Eaters included. I would have thought you would understand that, since you offered the Sanctuary to Peter." He felt Peter's hand close tightly on his wrist for a moment, but didn't look at him. He was still irritated with him.

Vera came a few steps nearer and then sat down on the grass, not seeming to notice how cold and wet it was. Her eyes were gentle, deep with sadness.

"If everyone deserves that," Vera whispered, "then why don't you deserve it, Harry?"

Harry turned his head away from her.

"I was just asking," said Vera. "It seems a simple question, Harry. You're encouraging other people to be selfish, to a certain point, and discover all the wild beauty they can spin out of themselves. Why, then, don't you want to discover what you can spin out of your own soul?"

"It's different," said Harry. "For me, it's different." Oh, Merlin, how he hated this. He felt as though someone were peeling his skin off in strips, leaving his soul exposed. No, it would have to be something deeper than my soul. She's already seen that.

"Tell me how," said Vera.

"If you've Seen it, why don't you tell me?" Rudeness should make her go away, Harry thought. It worked on most people. It was one of his favorite distraction techniques. They would start getting angry at a rude person, and not think clearly, or decide that a rude, sullen person was not worth helping.

"All right," said Vera.

No! No, Merlin damn it, I didn't mean to make her do that! Harry whipped around again, not sure what he was going to do. Maybe there was a spell on his lips, maybe he was going to strike at Vera. He didn't get a chance to find out, since Peter wrapped him tightly in his arms, and Harry couldn't do anything that would also hurt Peter. He struggled miserably for a moment, but Peter held him fast.

"You really can't fathom that you're the same as anyone else," said Vera, her voice low and relentless. "You don't think you're worthy of love unless you're doing things for other people, and even then, you expect the love to be taken away the moment you fail a task or disappoint someone else. You want others to maintain their health, but if yours is worn down, you don't care, as long as the wearing out benefits or frees another person. You're willing to forgive others for the most extreme insults and harm against you, even abuse that should never be forgiven, but you castigate yourself to death for the slightest faults. You would intervene in a moment if you found someone else suffering what you did. For yourself, you see it as normal. You are interested in other people's souls to the extent of drowning yourself in them, but you think that no one can know your own, because it's ugly and uninteresting." She paused. "I think that's most of it, Harry, the core. You don't really see yourself as human, do you?"

Merlin, this hurt, and Harry wanted her to stop. He caught his breath and did what he could to push the hurt away from himself, especially since Peter's arms had tightened around Harry and he was making some absurd noise of horror. "Of course I do," he said, throat so tight that it pained him to speak. "I have one head, two arms, two legs, eyes and nose and ears in the right place—"

Vera reached out and placed a hand on his forehead. "Harry," she said. Her voice had a sound of tears. "You have never allowed yourself to heal. You have broken some webs and some barriers holding you back, but those are only some of them—in fact, the ones you have broken are almost all the ones that would prevent you from being of service to as many people as possible. You've turned your focus from serving your brother to serving others. You have not come to consider yourself worthy of rest, or peace, or relaxation, or love. And there is no reason for that, not the logical ones that you convince

yourself are there. You know it, even, and that is why you did not want me to voice them aloud. Laid before you like that, you know they're illogical."

Harry twisted his head away from her hand, but then the only option was burying his face in Peter's shoulder. He stiffened and held still instead. "You don't understand," he whispered, making sure they could both hear his words. "You're wrong. It's just—this is just the way it has to be."

"It does not," said Vera. "You cannot do everything, Harry, and no one expects that of you—save your mother, whom I would like to do more than slap." Her voice deepened and darkened for a moment, then returned to normal. "You can indeed deserve what you would give others. And I think, when we leave, you will see that."

Harry turned back around to stare at her. He had to resist the temptation to cuddle back into Peter. I knew that would happen. I do want comfort, and that's a weakness I can't afford, now or ever. "What do you mean?"

Vera raised her eyebrows. "Why, we are taking you back to the Sanctuary with us, of course," she said. "Your soul is torn nearly in two. I do not need permission from my brothers and sisters in a case as bad as this. You need the rest and the peace that you can find there to keep from collapsing. And in a place where you can't hide, you will have no way to avoid healing."

Harry snarled. A wind blew past him, stinging his cheeks and stirring Vera's neat bun, as his magic surged. "I won't go," he said.

"Because people need you here," Vera surmised.

"Yes, exactly."

"Are you not allowed to be selfish, then?" Vera asked. "Are you not allowed to think about what you need every once in a while, Harry?"

"Please stop talking to me that way," said Harry.

“What way?”

“As if you actually cared. You can’t. You’re a stranger.”

“A Seer is no stranger to anyone she meets,” said Vera quietly. “Not when she can cast one glance and know your soul. And I’ve had to learn compassion across long years, since the first soul any Seer looks at is her own, and I was—rather wanting, then.” Her voice was wry. “I know that Peter told you Seers can’t lie, Harry. And I’m not lying now. I do want to take you back to the Sanctuary. I do think that you need to rest, and that the outside world can do without you for at least a month. And when the others gaze upon you, they will understand why I think so. There is no one in the Sanctuary who will not care for you, Harry.”

“Imagine it, Harry,” Peter said gently. “You can be with me and Remus. We’re reconciling, step by step. I mentioned that in my letter. I know he’d like to see you.”

Harry realized, abruptly, that part of him did want to go, rather savagely. But there was no way that he could let his commitments lapse like that.

“No,” he said.

“Harry—“ Vera began.

Harry’s head jerked abruptly to the side, and he gasped. Peter tightened his arms around him as if he were preparing to Apparate right there and there.

“Harry?” he said, somewhere beyond the distant, watery world of agony in which Harry was now immersed.

Harry felt as though a fishhook had lodged behind his cheekbone. He understood it a moment later. Draco needed him—didn’t just want his presence, but genuinely needed him. A moment after that, Harry could hear him screaming in intense pain, a sound that made Harry’s own ears ring and his body clench.

“I can’t,” he said, to Peter and Vera and anyone else who might be listening, and gathered himself, and jumped, pushing against the anti-Apparition wards as he headed straight to Draco’s side.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Julia Malfoy

Draco nodded decisively, and stood. One hand fingered the vials of dark potion in his pocket, but he quickly pulled it away and folded it casually across his chest, in case anyone should notice. Then he worried that either Blaise or Vince would notice that, and settled for a casual-sounding cough.

"It's no good," he announced. The lie he'd prepared didn't roll off his lips as smoothly as he thought it should, after he'd practiced it in his head most of the day, but that was all right. Blaise gave him only a faintly interested glance, and Vince, bent over his own Charms homework, grunted. "I can't find the information I'll need in our textbook. I have to go the library."

Vince grunted again. Blaise cocked his head. "For what subject?" he asked.

"I—what?" Somehow, Draco hadn't got as far as planning that part out. His lie was designed to get him alone so that he could take the potion, not to stand up under close scrutiny.

"What subject are you looking for?" Blaise had caught the stuttering hesitation in his words, and was studying him curiously now, one finger poised between the pages of his book. Even Vince was looking up, blinking as if it took a lot of effort to recall his mind from the depths of his study. "I'm behind on Transfiguration. Maybe I could go with you and find some books, too."

Draco managed to give a shaky snort. He hoped Blaise wouldn't pick up on the fact that it was shaky, but knew that was a little too much to expect. Blaise had been Sorted into Slytherin for a reason. "It's not Transfiguration," he said, rather than make up a subject.

Silence. Blaise raised his eyebrows, and when Draco said nothing, he smiled. "Well? What subject is it, then?"

Draco scowled at him. "Herbology, if you must know."

That cured the problem. Blaise had no use for Herbology, and had got his last three detentions for mimicking Professor Sprout behind her back. He shrugged and turned back to his book. Draco huffed and made for the door.

“Draco?”

Wondering when in the name of sanity his roommates had started paying so much attention to his business, Draco summoned a sickly smile and turned around to look at Vince. “Yes?”

“Are you all right?” Vince asked.

Draco sighed as he eyed the other boy. Vince was being more perceptive this year, now that he didn’t have Greg around to absorb most of his attention. Draco just wished he would be perceptive at someone else. “I am,” he said. “I just don’t like being behind in Herbology, of all subjects, and I wish that the professors wouldn’t assign us homework on bloody Halloween.”

Vince, apparently reassured, nodded at him and then tackled Charms again with a heavily furrowed brow. Greg would have helped him if he were here, Draco knew. Greg was marginally better in Charms, and the two had been close enough friends to help each other in every subject.

But Draco had something more important to do than help anyone with random homework assignments or feel random pangs of guilt, so he slipped out of the room and through the common room. To his delight, Pansy wasn’t among the Slytherin students sprawled lazily on couches and practicing spells or writing essays or discussing professional Quidditch. She was the only other one who’d been watching him closely enough this year that she’d probably notice Draco’s distraction.

Odd, how I notice that, now, Draco thought, as he ducked out of the dungeons. I didn’t really think about Pansy that much for the last few weeks.

Well, the potion was made.

Draco wondered if it was odd that his attention had managed to turn so effectually to other things when that potion was finished, and then shrugged. In a few hours, he'd have far different concerns. He was confident that he could summon Julia and gain the power from her that he'd need to be equal to Harry.

And then, Harry wouldn't need to look anywhere else ever again for comfort and love, the way that he did now with those stupid lessons and the hours he spent chatting with people Draco didn't like and knew were beneath him, like that prat Smith. He wouldn't feel that Draco was unworthy of him in any way. And Draco wouldn't feel like he had to cringe in Harry's shadow, either. Things could finally be the way they were meant to be, as a relationship of equals.

He patted the potion vials in his pocket and quickened his pace. He knew the perfect place to summon a Malfoy spirit. The research in the library had provided him with more information than just the clues to making the potion and which ancestor he should choose for his calling.

Draco took a final look around the hidden room, and then nodded. Yes, he was right, and the books had been right. No one had disturbed this place since the last time a Malfoy had been here, his great-grandfather. He let the door fall shut with a little snick, and stepped forward into the center of the place.

Superficially, this was only one of Hogwarts' many abandoned rooms. To a Malfoy's eyes, though, it was far more. Even as Draco watched, soft wards and sigils lit up on the walls, streaming power in brilliant flames of blue-gray, the color of their old crest, the color of the stone the Manor was built of. They whispered welcome to him in a voice that purred down his spine.

One of the few things that he would never envy Harry, Draco thought as he extracted the vials from his pocket, was his blood family. They didn't care anything for him, or they did but were extremely remiss about showing it. Draco had never had to doubt that his parents loved him, and that he came from one of the most important wizarding families in Great Britain.

I'll make that family proud tonight, he thought, as his gaze locked on the center of the floor. There was no circle visible there, but he could feel the pressure of power, building almost to pain, that said there had once been. His great-grandfather would have conducted experiments on prisoners for Grindelwald there, though so secretly that no one had ever figured out the identity of Grindelwald's prime torturer. Draco had only been able to put it together because of family stories combined with the hints and tinges of fancy in the books.

He drew his wand from his robe pocket opposite to the one where he'd put the vials, and held it out in front of him. "Circino!"

See, Harry, I do so listen, he thought smugly as the spell blazed a circle into the stones, shining the same blue-gray color as the wards. If one wasn't going to be a necromancer and make the sacrifices—like not speaking more than twice a year—that Pansy's father had, then they had to draw a circle to contain the summoned spirit. Draco had read the books, and listened when Harry lectured him about it. He wasn't going to be careless. He knew that Julia's power would raise him in many people's eyes, and lead to enough risks of its own after he had it. He certainly wouldn't just snatch it sloppily as he went about getting it.

That's the thing Harry doesn't understand, he thought sadly as he drew out the silver goblets he'd written home for and begged his mother prettily to send him. He doesn't know what having that much magic really means. He doesn't see the way people half-bow to him even when he's standing still and not looking in their direction. Well, I know it, and once I have that power, I can defend him and let him do what he wants with his own magic.

That was so agreeable to Draco that he spent a moment daydreaming about it before he uncorked the first vial, the one that held the thicker version of the potion, and filled one of the silver goblets with it. Then he filled the second goblet with the lighter, thinner portion. It steamed as he poured it, and a thin tendril of silver smoke curled up over the lip of the goblet towards him.

Patience, patience, Draco thought at it, shaking his head, and then closed his eyes and made an effort to calm himself down. It was difficult, when he knew the culmination of his dreams for the last several months waited just a few inches away.

Annoyingly, when he cleared his mind, the voices he heard were his mother's and Harry's, not exclaiming in wonder over his newfound magic, but encouraging him to wait, to promise that he wouldn't drink the potion.

Draco snorted and opened his eyes. He had kept his promise to Harry. Harry had asked him to wait when he made the potion. Draco had waited, and hadn't used it on Halloween morning. But it was Halloween night now, and he had to drink it in just a few minutes if he wanted to be able to summon Julia Malfoy's ghost and negotiate her power out of her before the night ended.

His mother...Draco winced. Well. He was still breaking his promise to her, and using the potion on this night of all nights. But she was pureblood. She would understand when he emerged from this and explained the full implications of what he'd done. She had always wanted his happiness and his calm, clear, secure future. Draco was only taking a few extra steps to claim that future for himself. She would understand once she saw how he had become a Malfoy magical heir and made himself a worthy partner for Harry in one go.

He stepped forward, careful not to touch and therefore smudge the glowing blue-gray line of the circle, and set the goblet with the lighter portion of the potion inside it. Then he lifted his goblet and saluted the circle.

"Julia Malfoy," he said, invoking the spirit he wanted by name. "I am your descendant, Draco Malfoy, and I ask your compliance and attendance." He swallowed the thick potion all at once.

The potion gushed down his throat, seeming to move faster than he could possibly have swallowed it. Draco expected to gag, but he didn't. What happened was that his stomach surged and then fell still, and his sight began to shimmer along the edges. Suddenly the blue-

gray light seemed much more present and clear than he remembered it, and the stone became less solid. It felt as if he were dreaming.

He saw the goblet inside the circle tilt, and the lighter half of the potion ran out into an invisible mouth.

Draco hissed under his breath. This was it, then. He had reached out, and it had been up to his ancestress to respond. Obviously, she'd wanted to. He smiled, and a flash of buoyant confidence passed through him. He sat down calmly outside the circle and waited for her to show up.

Trails of silver smoke like the one that had circled the rim of the second goblet rose and began to twine around each other. Draco watched in fascination as they mingled and nuzzled each other like serpents mating, and then linked together so thickly that he could not make out the space that had been between them just a moment before. Then he realized that the snakes, together, formed a woman's slender, pale arm.

Draco swallowed. The taste of the potion still lingered on his tongue, heavy and thick.

Other trails of smoke formed other body parts, all floating independently of each other: another arm, an ankle, a hand, several fingers, a nose. Draco found himself looking down, not wanting to see what would happen if Julia materialized naked. But he snapped his head up quickly enough when the silver images all collided, and then the specter of a woman floated there, just barely colored in.

Draco caught his breath. Julia Malfoy was smaller than he had thought she would be, but then, people tended to be smaller back then, weren't they? What mattered was that she stood proud and slender, her chin lifted, and her blue eyes fixed on him with full understanding. Down her back cascaded a wave of silvery hair with a subtle, unnatural shimmer to it. She wore an old-fashioned silvery gown, or maybe that was only the way the smoke made it seem. She didn't look much like him, or Lucius, but his father would have approved anyway. She was very Malfoyish.

Draco licked his lips and hoped the spell had worked as it should, letting Julia understand his language. He knew she had spoken a different variety of English then, and he wouldn't trust his Latin with a woman who probably spoke it natively. "I—hello. I'm Draco Malfoy. You know who I am?"

For a moment, Julia stood motionless, her head tilted as though she were listening to a distant echo instead of his voice. But then her eyes fixed on his face, and she nodded rapidly, the motion almost heron-like in its fluidity.

"You are my many-times-distant-son," she said, her voice as ethereal as her hair was. "Or you could not have summoned me. We must be bound by direct ties of blood."

Draco smiled. He'd been a little overawed by her at first, but that was changing as he saw how firmly she stayed within the circle. In fact, its sides flared with blue-grayish power when Julia drifted towards them, and chased her back into the middle. He was obviously in control here, and the necromantic magic had worked just fine, damn Harry and his objections. "Yes," he said. "I'm a descendant of your son Octavius." That just made Julia raise her eyebrows at him, and Draco was reminded of Professor McGonagall. He pushed the thought away. It wasn't a comfortable one to have when he was supposed to be becoming an adult. "I used a potion that would make me a magical heir of someone in my family, since I can't be my father's, and I turned up your spirit as being in sympathy-song with mine. So I called you."

Julia regarded him in silence again for a long time. Now, Draco was rather reminded of Harry. He forced himself not to fidget, though. He hadn't had his childhood training for nothing.

"You want my magic," she said.

"To be your magical heir, yes," said Draco, and nodded. Then he stopped nodding. He was sure that too many wild, uncontrolled motions of his head on his neck were making him look like an idiot. "I knew you were a Lady, or powerful enough to be a Lady. I'd like to be the heir of someone powerful."

“Why do you want this strength?” Julia asked softly.

“I’m in love with someone who’s going to be a Lord,” said Draco. “Or, well, he could be a Lord, but he doesn’t want to. Right now, anyway.” He would have to see if he could get Harry to change his mind about that. Lords had traditionally taken paths that were above politics most of the time. Harry was too blindly noble to do so, but he would have to listen to Draco once he had the same kind of magic Harry did. “I want to make sure that I can protect and support him as an equal. It would kill him to love someone who wasn’t an equal partner to him. Kill us both, really.”

Once again, Julia scrutinized him. Draco wondered what was taking her so long. She could easily enough have said yes or no by now. Of course, she would have to say yes, so why was she taking so bloody long to make up her mind?

“Binding this person to you would improve the fortunes of our family?” Julia asked.

What—Oh. I should have known she would care about that. This was, after all, the woman who had seduced her own brother to keep the Malfoy line going forward and to spare her brother from the shame of having an illegitimate child or a cast-off wife. “Yes,” said Draco. “Yes, it would. There are two other Lords alive right now, but they’re blinded by each other, locked in this stupid struggle of Light and Dark. Harry has the power to break the deadlock. He’ll change the world. And I think the Malfoys should stand with him. I’m his best friend. I’m going to be his lover, in time. I promise you, I’m doing this for my own advantage, but it’s not going to hurt our family.” He smiled at Julia, and tried to make his tone coaxing. “And we’ve had a magical heir in the direct descent for the last thirteen generations.”

“Perhaps that has been long enough,” said Julia softly.

Draco blinked at her. “Why would you say that?” he protested. “Don’t you want the honor and glory of the Malfoys to go on?”

“Not at the price of dishonor,” said Julia. “Tell me, child, why did you choose me in particular? Was it because of a true sympathy between your soul and mine, or because of the power that I wielded?”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “You sounded similar to me. I know that you were subtle and cunning and careful about how you used your power. I would be, too. I want it mostly to protect Harry and to assure the fortunes of our family. I promise.”

“Tell me, child,” said Julia, “why do you think I never declared myself a Lady?”

“Well,” said Draco, “because you could get more done working behind the scenes. And besides, I thought Lords and Ladies at that time who declared themselves got wound up in all sorts of petty battles.” Sort of like the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. Maybe I don’t want Harry to declare himself a Lord after all, if that stupidity would overtake him. “You did things with cunning, like the way that you seduced your brother. A Dark Lady would be too open for that.”

Julia’s eyes narrowed, and her lips pinched. It took Draco a moment to realize she was smiling. She was one of the few people he had ever met who didn’t smile by showing her teeth. “So I would have declared myself a Dark Lady, but for my need to convince others I was harmless,” she said.

Draco nodded. “I can do the same thing. I don’t need to be a Dark Lord to be happy. I just need Harry, and to be equal to Harry, and to know that he respects and loves me as much as I do him.”

Julia closed her eyes. “Child,” she breathed, “you have badly misjudged my character.”

Draco stared at her. No. That isn’t possible. “If you weren’t in sympathy with me,” he said aloud, “you wouldn’t have responded. So I got that part right.”

Julia pinned him with a fathomless stare. “Child—“

“Don’t call me that.”

"You are worthy of no other title," said Julia, with maddening calm. "Child, this is Halloween, the night when spirits are strongest. I was able to cross the barriers because I chose to answer your call. I was curious, and I thought that one of my own blood who would call me out of my long rest must have a compelling reason to do so." She narrowed her eyes. "Imagine my displeasure when I find out that that is not the case."

Draco sprang to his feet and watched as she floated towards the edge of the circle. "But I made the circle," he whispered.

Julia broke the blue-gray light with a wave of her hand. At once, Draco fell to his knees, clutching his head. He could sense the magic around her, buzzing, singing swarms of power. The circle had dimmed it before, but it was abundantly clear now that Julia had only been staying in those confines because she had wanted to.

And she had most definitely been a Lady in life, declared or not. Draco had no doubt that this power was the strength of someone who could destroy him with another wave of her hand, if she chose. Dumbledore's power was familiar, Harry's comforting. This was like being locked in a room with a wild panther, a beast that already had iron claws fastened around his temples.

He could feel his heart beating fast in his ears, his breath coming noisy in his lungs, with terror.

"Understand," Julia whispered. "If I had declared myself Lady of anything, it would have been of the Light."

Draco rolled on his back and stared up at her. He didn't know when he'd dropped to the floor, but there he was, and there Julia was, hovering over him, the air around her flaring with fire.

"Oh," said Julia, "not that I particularly wanted to, or that that was where my first inclinations lay. But it was a matter of necessity. Before any of my other magic awoke but the most minor accidental mishaps, there was one particular gift, at the foundation of it all. That

gift wouldn't let me choose any other set of ideals but the Light. I would have destroyed myself if I tried."

She smiled at Draco. "I don't particularly want to go rampaging around Hogwarts," she said. "Lords and children who should not have developed their power so young, faugh. I will return to my rest. On the other hand, I have no wish to let you go without granting you a gift, Draco. That was what you wished for, wasn't it? To be my magical heir?"

Draco watched, beyond fear now, as Julia dipped a hand into the pocket of her silvery gown and drew out something like a swarm of silver singing bees.

"You need to learn manners," she said. "And patience, and consideration for the feelings of others. I would not have it said that my heir was without any of those qualities. I think your lover will appreciate it, too. This is not Lord-level power, but it did teach me more than any other ability I possessed about moving in the world."

She blew on her hand, and the swarm of bees soared across the air and towards him like a puff of dandelion down, falling on and curling around his shoulders.

"Enjoy the gift, Draco," she said. "Make me proud, my heir." Then she vanished, and the blue-gray light went with her.

Draco lay there in the darkness for a moment, breathing—

And then claws dug into his brain, sculpting it, twitching and twisting it into new pathways, and bees stung his skin, and swords scraped along his spine, and unfamiliar fluff pressed close on his arms, and he screamed, and screamed, and fainted for a moment, caught in the overwhelming pain.

"Hush, Draco. It's all right. Wake up. I'm here now."

Draco forced his eyes open slowly, sobbing, and found Harry there. Harry held him close, and his magic flooded the room, chasing away

the lingering pain of Julia's. Draco felt it swarm him, drape him, hold him close.

The pain ceased at once. Draco let his head fall back with a grateful gasp. He breathed around the tears, and managed to whisper, "What was that? What did she give me?"

"She?" Harry's hands went tight on his body. "Draco—you summoned Julia, didn't you? You bloody idiot. I told you to wait!"

"I waited," Draco protested. He winced, and touched his head. It was throbbing, and not with the pain of suddenly released magic. What gift did she give me? "I waited until I knew you were in the meeting, and then I summoned her. I didn't know that she was going to do that."

"What did she do?" Harry shifted Draco so that he sat with his head on one of Harry's shoulders, Harry's arm wrapped tightly around his upper back. Harry was still smaller than Draco was, but the presence of his magic served to make him effectively larger. "I felt your pain through that spell I've been using to keep track of when you need me, but you don't have any physical wounds."

"Mental," Draco whispered. "Something mental. It has to be." He felt a growing irritation against his ancestress, and he concentrated on it to distract himself from his fear, and the chant in the back of his mind that told him he'd done a very, very, very stupid thing.

Harry gently gripped and lifted his chin, locking his eyes with Draco's. "You trust me to use Legilimency?"

Draco swallowed and nodded. He didn't think it could hurt worse than the pain Julia had inflicted on him.

Harry murmured the spell, and his eyes went wide and dreamy. Draco watched his face while he stared in silence. Harry looked as if he'd suffered some massive shock, and, sweet Merlin, had the circles around his eyes always been that pronounced? It didn't look as though he'd been getting any sleep.

That's nonsense, the last time I looked at him he—

Draco caught his breath. And when was the last time I really looked at him? When was the last time I really touched him, except to yank him around? When was the last time we talked about anything other than the blasted potion?

For the first time, he could see the last two months as they were, without a veil over them. What he saw appalled him. He'd demanded Harry's company and interest in the potion, and everything he'd wanted, he got. But Harry wasn't normally the type to be that compliant with anyone.

Of course he's not. But he's exactly the type to figure out what you want and give it to you, while concealing his other actions. He risked his own life first year to defend his brother like the Muggle wanted. And who knows what he's been doing this time? I haven't exactly been paying enough attention to him to notice.

Oh, Merlin, I'm such an idiot.

Draco shuddered once and brought his own arms up to wrap fiercely around Harry. Shit. Oh, shit. He could have died, and I was too wrapped up in that potion and that bloody book to notice.

Harry let out a surprised little grunt, but didn't break his tranced gaze into Draco's eyes. A moment later, he leaned back from him, stared him in the face, and sighed.

"What?" Draco demanded. "What is it?"

"You're not going to like this," said Harry reluctantly. "Not if that's what I think it is. Look—focus on me for a moment."

Not a hard task, Draco thought, and did what he should have been doing all along.

Harry narrowed his eyes, and then Draco jumped as a quick wave of heat seemed to assault his face, like a sudden wash of sunburn. He

held up a hand in front of him, but the air didn't feel hot. It was just—heat, on his cheeks and his forehead and his eyebrows.

Then the heat went away. Harry rubbed his face with one hand.

“What?” Draco demanded again.

“You felt that because I was feeling angry,” said Harry quietly. “I let a bit of my anger out from behind my Occlumency shields. She’s made you into an empath, Draco, the kind who senses emotions as physical sensations on your skin.” He shook his head. “How do you manage to do these things to yourself?”

“So says the master of changing his life around,” said Draco, but it was empty sarcasm. His mind was reeling. This couldn't be true. He'd heard about empaths. They were—they were soggy. They were people who felt it when some little girl lost her kitten, or when some soppy witch broke up with her boyfriend, or when a first-year cried because she was away from home for the first time and scared. And while they could block out the emotions, they couldn't forget they'd felt them. They usually turned out to be disgustingly kind and helpful to the people who'd been hurting, even if it was just to cure the pain so they wouldn't feel it anymore, or to spread joy and happiness so that they could bask in that instead.

He remembered what Julia had said only too well, though.

You need to learn manners. And patience, and consideration for the feelings of others.

“She did,” Draco moaned, and put his head in his hands. “I’m fucked.”

“What’s more,” said Harry, his voice going dry, “you can feel emotional impressions left behind on objects, if they’re strong enough. I think you must have been feeling the echoes of pain once practiced in this room. It was a torture chamber, wasn’t it?”

Draco shuddered. “Does that mean that I’m going to start feeling them again the moment you and your magic move away from me?”

“No,” said Harry. “I can teach you how to shield, or weave temporary shields for you myself. But it’s quite a strong gift, Draco. I suspect Julia was an empath who was never quite able to escape the feelings she received from the people around her.”

No wonder she couldn’t declare herself a Dark Lady, Draco thought in misery. And I—

“Harry, will you ever respect me?” he whispered. “I wanted to be your equal so that you would respect me, but now I’m going to be wet, and I’m going to hurt when other people hurt, and it’s ridiculous, and I can’t believe she did this to me—“

Heat blasted his arms. Harry yanked himself away abruptly and stood, pacing around the room and waving his hands. Draco winced and put his hands up in front of his face, which, of course, did not stop the feeling that his eyebrows were being cooked.

But Harry could shield his rage behind Occlumency shields.

Unless he was really, really angry with me.

Draco swallowed.

“You were so bloody stupid,” said Harry, in a growl that was building towards a roar. “I asked you not to do this. Your mother asked you not to do this. I trusted you not to do this, Draco.” He turned and glared at him. Draco cowered.

“And now you did it,” said Harry, “and it’s changed the rest of your life. It’s always going to be there. And I have to take care of you, and, Merlin, how am I going to do that on top of the million other things I have to do? I have half a mind to just leave you to stew in the emotions you’re receiving, and burst into tears every time you pass someone who just failed an exam. It would be what you deserve, for doing this to yourself, and to me, and to other people.” He blew out a hard enough breath to make his fringe shiver and show his scar. Draco blinked and touched the center of his forehead. A faint pain was there.

“Harry,” he said.

His voice must have been soft enough to get Harry’s attention through the tirade, because Harry glared at him. “Yes?”

“Have you been having nightmares about the Dark Lord again?” Draco asked. And how in the world didn’t I notice? Guilt was gnawing out a comfortable hole for itself in his stomach.

Harry’s face was wiped clear of emotion in a second, and the hot, prickly sensation on Draco’s arms and face faded. What replaced it was a slick, slimy coolness that Draco was pretty sure was fear. Harry took a step back from Draco, watching him closely.

“Do you know what you have done to yourself?” he whispered.

“About what he deserves, I would say, Harry.”

Draco jumped and looked over Harry’s shoulder. A plain witch was coming through the door, shaking her head and clucking her tongue at nothing in particular. Her looks were nothing to owl home about, but her gaze was piercing, and Draco felt uncomfortable underneath it.

“Empathy,” said the stranger. “Yes, and Merlin knows, he needs it. About time that cramped little soul opened up to other people’s experiences. He’s been selfish for too long.” Draco wondered, indignantly, whose soul she was calling cramped.

“I have to shield him—” Harry began.

“Teach him how to shield,” said the stranger. “Then set him to researching empaths. Let him learn how to use that gift, since he’s not about to get rid of it. My name is Vera, and I’m a Seer,” she added, on catching Draco’s blank expression. “And I would snatch you both away to our Sanctuary and show you how to shield and teach Harry how to rest, if I didn’t think it would do you more good to be here, and that Harry won’t leave without you.”

“I don’t need to be taught how to rest.” Harry was radiating prickly heat all down Draco’s arms and face again.

But to Draco, what mattered the most was another part of her little speech. He looked at Harry, who was glaring at the witch with his arms folded. That didn’t conceal the deep exhaustion around his eyes, or the way he hunched in on himself as if he would roll up into a ball like a hedgehog any moment. Not anymore.

Draco bit his lip. Both his mother and father had taught him about what to do when he was in the wrong. Apologize only if he really must. Apologies didn’t mean anything.

Atonement does.

After his father had been caught acting as a Death Eater, he couldn’t just say that he was sorry and get on with things. He’d had to show that he was an upstanding member of the wizarding community: get involved with Hogwarts, influence the Ministry in acceptably subtle ways, donate money to St. Mungo’s and similar. He’d had to actually change the way he acted.

And if Harry wouldn’t leave and go to this Sanctuary place without him, then the least Draco could do was change the way he acted.

“I’ll take care of him,” he said quietly to the Seer. Vera glanced at him again, and Draco still didn’t like her gaze, but he did like the way she nodded to him.

“Don’t be an idiot, Draco,” said Harry. “I’m taking care of you. I need to shield you, and it’s obvious you can’t be trusted to keep yourself out of trouble for one red-hot second—”

“We’ll take care of each other, then,” said Draco, and thought he could stand now. He focused on Harry, and supposed that the wash of cool air coming over him was surprise. He smiled. He thought he could get to like it.

He decided to speak as if the Seer wasn’t in the room. For what he wanted to say to Harry, it didn’t matter if they had an audience or not.

"I wanted a Lord's power so that I could have a partnership with you that was absolutely equal, Harry," Draco told him. "And so that I could protect you and take care of you. But Julia didn't give that to me. And I made stupid mistakes in trying to acquire it, so I won't try any more."

Although if another way comes along...

Draco pushed the thought out of his head. Change, remember? "I have this empathy instead," he said, staring into Harry's eyes. "I know that you don't feel you can trust me right now." Distrust was another uncomfortable feeling, like stepping on sticks with his bare feet. "But I promise you, you can always trust me to protect you and defend you and be your friend. And if I ever feel anything from you that says I haven't done that, now I can correct myself right away."

"But—" Harry started to protest.

"If it's about not wanting to impose on me, stuff it," said Draco. "Everyone's going to be imposing on me equally, at least until I can learn to control this damn ability. I did this to myself, and I'll have to learn to live with it."

"If it's about not wanting me to care for you, I don't want to hear that, either. I've always cared for you, Harry, except for these last two months, and I really am sorry about that." There. Now the cool feeling of surprise was back—well, more like an icy gale on his face, really. That would be shock, then. "I was a prat, a git, a brat, whatever other names you'd like to call me."

"I don't expect you to spend all your time teaching me. I'm going to teach myself a lot of it." If only so I can be sure that Harry isn't overworking himself using some shield technique that drains him. "I wanted to be a magical heir to someone in my family, and I am. I wanted to be more powerful, and I am. I can't really complain. I got what I wanted." He smiled, and knew it was faint, but these next words were so important, and it hurt to say them. "I—I'm not your absolute equal in power, but I hope that you'll still consent to regard me as your friend."

Harry stared at him intently. His eyes cut more deeply than the Seer's did. Draco met him gaze for gaze. He meant what he said. He would invite Harry to use Legilimency on him if he wanted to be absolutely sure.

Harry whispered, "I need to enter your mind and show you how to shield."

"Of course," said Draco, and dropped his barriers, meeting Harry's eyes as he whispered Legilimens again.

Harry was in his mind in a moment, delicately spinning shields out of images of quicksilver, showing Draco how he overlaid them on certain aspects of his mind so that his magic was contained but not frozen; a solid container was bad. Harry would drape the pools on their targets for right now. It would cost him no effort to maintain them. It would be up to Draco, after this, to study and figure out how to do it for himself, and how to let the barriers part so that he could use his gift when he wanted.

If, of course, Draco was going to do that.

Draco took the opportunity to marshal his own emotions, and keep them patiently back until Harry was done with the shields. Then he sprang them on Harry, so that Harry could not doubt what he felt.

Patience. Trust. True repentance, and the promise to do better. Friendship. Love. Agony that he hadn't seen what was happening to Harry earlier. Anger against the stupidity of his concern with the potion. Pleading, because Draco couldn't stifle that, and because he didn't want Harry to break off their friendship—but neither did he want Harry to forgive him just because this was Harry and Harry forgave everybody. He wanted to know how low he had fallen in his friend's eyes, and how far he would have to climb to work himself back up.

It was terrifying. It was exhilarating. It was fine, because he was doing this in his mind, and Harry was the only one who could see it, and Draco did not mind, at least in this moment, about Harry seeing everything.

He felt Harry's wonder, and his shock, and then he drew back. Draco opened his eyes, blinked, and looked steadily at his friend.

Harry had his head cocked on one side, like that phoenix of his, studying Draco as if he'd never seen him before. Then he slowly, slowly nodded. "All right," he whispered. "I—it might take some time before I can trust that you're not going to annihilate yourself, Draco, but I'll have to trust you, because I've got too many other things to do. I can't follow you around all the time to make sure you keep your promises."

Draco nodded, and refused to blurt out his disappointment at that verdict. He couldn't. It wouldn't be fair. If he was ever to come to matter to Harry more than, and not just as much as, all his other duties and obligations, then it would have to be by his own efforts.

His brother redeemed himself in Harry's eyes. I'm not going to say that that bloody prat can do anything better than I can.

"Better results than I expected when I followed you here." Vera broke quietly in again. "I must ask you, Harry, if you won't reconsider coming to the Sanctuary. A month alone would do you wonders."

Harry looked at her and shook his head.

"May I ask why?" Vera's voice was soft enough to sound like floating dandelion fluff, and Draco saw tears edging her eyes.

"I do have things to do here," said Harry. "But that's only part of the reason. The other part is that I don't want to constantly be around people who can see me all the time, in a way that I can't see them. I've spent long enough with people who could control me, who had some advantage over me that I couldn't counter. Not ever again."

"Draco will be able to see part of you that no one else does, now," said Vera. Draco wondered, for a moment furious, why she'd brought that up—to try and coax Harry along with her, or just because it was true?

Harry blinked. "But he's Draco," he said. "And I trust him."

Draco had to turn his head away, or he was going to have an impossibly improper and soppy expression on his face. He furtively wiped at his eyes, and wondered if Harry would ever know how much those words had meant to him.

"I see," said Vera. "Well. I will not convince you to come along against your will, Harry."

"You seemed pretty damn determined to try, earlier." Harry said that in a snarl.

"My apologies, there," said Vera. "I simply assumed that once you heard about what your soul looked like and what the Sanctuary was, you would of course want to come." She sighed, a light sound. "Please remember that the Sanctuary is always open to you. For the school holidays, or the summer."

"I have a guardian," said Harry, in a hedgehog-voice.

Vera said nothing else that Draco could hear. The door opened and shut behind her, though.

"Draco?" Harry said a moment later.

Draco turned and faced his friend, and saw that his eyes had deepened with such intensity as to almost change their color. "Yes?" he asked. He couldn't not have, with that look coming at him.

"I have to know that you mean it," said Harry. "That you're really going to work at learning empathy and shielding. If you backslide on me now, I won't be able to trust you again."

Draco lifted his hand and held it up in front of him, palm presented to Harry. "I swear it," he said. "On my honor as a Malfoy, by Merlin and my magic." He paused, searching Harry's face, and found what he needed there. "On my honor as your friend."

Then he stretched out his hand in front of him, in the simple sort of gesture he and Harry hadn't shared in so long, and waited.

Harry sidled close to him, still looking like a wild, bruised thing, and then clasped his hand.

And then he actually moved even closer and hugged Draco, his body going totally relaxed for a moment. Draco held him close, exulting, well aware of how fragile this was and what might happen to shatter it, as Harry whispered, "I missed you."

Thank you, he thought fervently, to Harry and perhaps even to Julia. Thank you for giving me a second chance. I promise, I won't screw this one up.

"I missed you, too," he whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Explosions

Harry dreamed.

“Welcome home, my lord.” Bellatrix’s voice was soft and exultant as she steadied the small throne on the ground. “Oh, welcome home at last.”

Voldemort’s hissing laughter came from the center of the chair. Harry still couldn’t see him, though he could see Bellatrix and the chair better in the dim half-light of dawn than he had in his last vision. He snuck around them in a circle, watching carefully. He still didn’t think he was actually present, but this area where they had landed was more open than the forest where Harry had seen them last time. Harry could see a long stretch of empty beach plunging down to meet the water, and beyond that, a waste of equally empty downs.

Nagini slithered around the chair, and hissed something that Harry’s ears translated as, “Are you comfortable, dear Master?”

“Always, with you near,” Voldemort hissed back. Parseltongue didn’t sound that much different from English to Harry, at least while he was speaking it, but Voldemort’s voice managed to make the innocent snake language sound foul and perverse. He gave a little shudder that made his fur bristle, and kept watching.

“We must move,” Voldemort told Bellatrix. “Nagini needs a warm place, and so will I. And then—then the sun.” He was laughing again, and Harry fixed his eyes on the ground, the soft sand beneath his paws, so that he wouldn’t have to watch the expression on Bellatrix’s face when she listened to the laughter. She looked as if she considered it richest music.

“Yes, my lord,” the Death Eater said, and scooped up the chair. Harry stared despite himself at the end of her right wrist. It was capped with—something. He thought it was not a hand, but it shimmered and flexed like moonlight on water, and it obviously gripped like a hand even if it wasn’t one.

The dream moved on, tracking Voldemort and Bellatrix and Nagini across the sand, and Harry perforce followed. The pain in the center of his forehead was growing worse, but he didn't know why. This scene was almost peaceful.

Until they climbed the first down off the beach, of course, and met a Muggle walking alone, whistling to himself. He paused and stared at Bellatrix with his mouth open.

Nagini killed him, since Bellatrix's hands were rather occupied. Harry supposed it was a more merciful death than he could have had, given how Bellatrix liked to torture her victims, but it hardly mattered as he watched Nagini's teeth and coils bear down, and heard the quick scream the Muggle gave before that was choked off. And watching Bellatrix tear a bit from the body and bring it back to feed to the invisible thing in the chair was almost more than Harry could stand.

"Welcome home, my lord," Bellatrix murmured again, making a motion as though she were wiping at milk on a child's cheek. Harry highly doubted that this was anything so innocent as milk. "Welcome home at last."

Harry felt the pain in his scar grow to the point where he could feel it blazing through into reality, and then he burst back to himself, gasping and grabbing at his forehead, with the knowledge that Voldemort had returned to Britain.

Draco opened his eyes sharply. He didn't know why. He'd been dreaming one moment, quite comfortably ensconced in a place that had the best features of Malfoy Manor and Florean Fortescue's mixed together, and now he was in his bed with his forehead tingling—

His forehead.

Draco swallowed and carefully pushed the curtains of his bed back. He had discovered in the past few days that he could ignore most emotions as ghost sensations, unless they were very strong or they came from Harry. He had a good idea why his forehead was hurting now.

He padded quietly over to Harry's bed, since a quick Tempus check told him it was still only six in the morning, and twitched on Harry's curtain. He heard a quick, startled breath, then the rustling that meant Harry was turning over and trying to pretend he was still asleep.

Draco leaned in and glared at his friend. Harry's face was relaxed, his mouth slightly parted as though in wonder at a dream. He'd even got his eyes darting back and forth under his eyelids in pursuit of the imaginary vision. But he hadn't thought to clean off the trail of blood that had run down his cheek.

"Harry," Draco hissed at him. "I know that you're awake, damn you. Open your eyes and talk to me."

Harry still tried to pretend for a moment, and then he rolled over and blinked at Draco, one hand rising as though to cover a yawn—and, just incidentally, shield the trail of blood from view. "Hi, Draco," he said. "What are you doing awake so early? Did you have a bad dream?"

"For the love of Merlin." Draco crawled onto Harry's bed and let the curtains fall shut behind him. "Look. This is stupid. We've had a few days to get used to this now, and that means that you know I have empathy, and I know I have empathy, and I've memorized your words to me. You said that you didn't mind me being able to see your emotions because it was me. Was that a lie?" He could feel hurt rising, but he shoved it away, in favor of being angry. Showing pain would just make Harry that more likely to lie.

"No," said Harry, blinking as if he couldn't understand how their conversation had taken this sudden turn. "I do trust you, Draco, you know that. I trust you more than anyone else."

Draco wanted to crow in glee, but instead he put the words away to admire at a later time. "Then start bloody well acting like it, Harry," he muttered, and plucked at the sheets. "You trust me, and you know that I can feel your dreams, anyway. Why do you pretend that you're not having them?"

Harry's shoulders hunched, making him look like a turtle. Or a coward. Draco thought about it for a moment, then told him so.

Harry stared at him in sheer astonishment. Draco squinted and felt out through his shields, still a tedious process, like groping about for his wand in a darkened room. Yes, there was the faint sensation of cold wind on his face. Harry really was shocked. "I'm not—I didn't even know you might say that to me," Harry muttered.

"Good," said Draco. "Then maybe you'll listen to other things I say, too. This is getting ridiculous. I made some promises, and I'm trying my best to act on them, Harry, but I want promises from you, too. Are you going to make me go through this silly charade every time you have a dream, which I can feel, or are you going to simply confess and tell me when you have one?"

"I'll tell you if they wake you up," Harry tried to bargain.

"Every time," Draco insisted.

Harry frowned at him. Draco raised an eyebrow and waited. Harry had been acting slightly different in the past few days, as though someone had told him something that he wanted to take into consideration, but he was too obviously searching for a way back. Draco understood. He would have liked to be able to step back to their uncomplicated friendship of a few months earlier, too, when he hadn't made as many stupid mistakes as he had.

But Draco wasn't about to let Harry find the road back. He had changed. So had Harry. Draco had known that the first time Harry shied from his touch, if not earlier. And if he let Harry get away with this, then the prat would just find some way to smother his pain from the dreams, or maybe make Draco's shields thicker so that he couldn't sense them.

And the maddening thing was, he would do it for unselfish reasons; those were his real ones. Draco didn't care, though. It was still maddening.

"All right," said Harry at last, and let his head fall back on the pillow with a sigh. "Merlin, you don't give up, do you?"

"Never," said Draco, and felt able to give a smug smile at Harry, which was returned with interest as a frown. "Really, Harry, if you would just look at that serpent I gave you once in a while, then you'd—"

He shut up as he heard a soft hissing sound travel through the dungeons. He flinched. He'd only heard that sound once before, but he knew what it portended. It wasn't easy to forget.

"Oh, no," he muttered.

"Draco?" Harry was sitting upright in a moment, looking around as though to move between him and danger. "What is it?"

"My mother's decided on the response she's going to make for my summoning Julia against her will," said Draco hollowly. The hissing sound was right next to the bed now, and even knowing it would only hurt for a moment, he winced and cowered. Harry had been the one to insist that Draco write a letter to Narcissa telling her the truth, but he had thought the only possible retaliation would be a Howler. Draco knew better. "She's done it before."

"When?" Harry asked, even as the curtains parted and a silvery shape slithered its way across the bed to Draco. Harry was handing his wand with barely a twitch of his hand, and then he hissed, as though he thought he could speak to the snake and distract it from its duty. Draco shook his head at him.

"When I tried to practice a Blasting Curse on one of our house elves," said Draco, wincing just at the memory, "and wound up destroying one of my mother's family heirlooms instead." He held out his hand, palm flat. The snake wrapped around his wrist. It was much bigger than the tiny serpent that had attacked him last year, but just as artificial, made of gleaming metal. It did not stop hissing as it fixed glittering green eyes on Draco's face, but its jaws parted, and Narcissa's voice came out.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy,” she said.

Draco looked down.

“I am very disappointed in you.”

That was what she had said about the chest he’d destroyed, too. Draco had to force himself not to curl his hand up. The snake would only pry it flat and administer the bite anyway, as it had last time. It would hurt less this way.

“Disappointed enough to use the heir-snake,” Narcissa continued. “What you did was unworthy of your name, unworthy of the pride that we raised you to have. To go begging to the dead, Draco. I had thought you were long past such childish courses, that you would never have considered them.

“And you broke your promise to me. You are not an adult, as long as you do so. You are a child.”

Draco swallowed.

“Heir-snake?” Harry nudged him with one elbow.

“Explain in a minute,” Draco muttered. “I don’t know if she’s done yet.”

Narcissa, as it happened, was not done. “Your father has said that he will congratulate you on becoming a magical heir to the Malfoy line, but only when you have shown him that you can be an adult. Until then, you need a reminder of what you have been and must grow away from.”

The snake whipped its head around and bit straight into the center of his palm. Draco sucked in his breath, but did not cry aloud. The serpent would be able to hear that, and would carry the sound back to his parents.

The snake slithered gracefully off his arm a moment later, and off the bed. It would make its way back to Malfoy Manor and freeze into

motionlessness once more, until Narcissa again had cause to punish him.

Draco watched in dread as the bite in the center of his palm colored quickly, and then transformed into an image of himself as a two-year-old, wiping its eyes and crying. It didn't make any sound, luckily, being no worse than a magical photograph, but anyone who looked at it could see his face going blotchy and his mouth gaping in the moans of a spoiled child. Draco started to fold his hand shut.

"Let me see."

Harry gripped his wrist and gently turned his hand over, frowning at the image. "Do you want me to heal it?" he asked.

Draco found himself smiling, though he knew it was a shaky expression. "No. The heir-snake would just return and bite me again."

"What was that all about?" Harry went on lightly holding Draco's hand, not seeming to realize he was doing it—or perhaps he had realized, and was willingly reaching out for contact. Since Halloween, Harry had seemed reluctant to endure any touch that he didn't initiate. Draco flexed his fingers, partially to enjoy this while he had it and partially to ease the pain of the bite, and explained.

"It's an heirloom that Malfoy mothers, or the women who marry into the Malfoy line, inherit. It's used to punish children who really should know better. It reminds them of what they were when they break a promise or do something else younger than their age." He peered at the crying image in his palm, and found it, if possible, more horrid than before. He gave Harry a sickly smile. "I knew she'd probably do that. I broke my promise to her. I haven't done that in years, and never in a way that could have endangered my life before."

Harry snorted. "I'm glad to see that you realized that much, at least. Go back to sleep, Draco. It's Saturday. We don't have to be awake for a while yet."

Draco nodded, but waited until Harry pulled away from him and lay down again before he climbed back into his own bed. Even then, he

hesitated to murmur, “No more nightmares without telling me, Harry, remember?”

Silence, and then Harry sighed and said, “No more nightmares. Good morning, Draco.”

Draco slid back into his bed satisfied, despite the lingering pain in his hand. He knew he was being an annoyance, but that was the only way to keep Harry from retreating into his shell, and so far, it had worked.

Besides, he knew his mother wasn’t furious with him. If she were, she would have sent him the heir-snake with instructions for it to bite him in public.

“We wish you would let us bite him.”

Harry rolled his eyes as he and Draco entered the Great Hall for breakfast. The comment from the Many had become the usual order of things, and he no longer knew why. Draco hadn’t done anything especially annoying in the last week; in fact, he’d been much better than he was before, now that the compulsion on his mind and heart had finally cracked. “No,” he said, just as he always said, and sat down at the Slytherin table.

The Many hissed in irritation, but the smell of food distracted the little snake, and soon it had crawled up his wrist and was daintily eating the bits of food he deigned to feed it. Harry glanced around the room halfway through breakfast, noticing with a faint curiosity that most of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students were there. Of course, it was Saturday, but even last weekend, most of them hadn’t eaten at the same time.

Really? Are you sure? You had other things to notice last weekend.

Harry winced at nothing and shook his head. He was—well, compromising on the issue of Vera’s words. He kept them hovering beneath the surface of his mind, and peeked at them when he absolutely couldn’t stand it any longer. Otherwise, though, he ignored them as much as possible. She had said many hurtful things, things

that could prevent him from helping others if he spent too much time thinking about them. So he wouldn't.

He caught Connor's eye from where he sat at the Gryffindor table, and smiled slightly. His brother was yawning, one hand pressed in front of his mouth and his nose wrinkled. He straightened up the moment he caught sight of Harry, though, as if he wanted to prove that he was too adult to yawn. Harry lifted his forkful of sausage to him in greeting, and Connor nodded back.

"Attention, students."

Harry jumped slightly. Dumbledore hadn't been behind the head table a moment ago, but he was there now, and most of the other professors were with him—minus Snape, which made Harry close his eyes for a moment. Dumbledore, of course, was smiling, and he held out one hand in front of him as though to give a blessing.

"As you know," Dumbledore continued ceremoniously, "we have left the Goblet of Fire alone for a week—long enough for worthy students of all schools to enter their names in a bid to compete in the Triwizard Tournament."

Oh, yes, that nonsense. Harry had known that a few upper-level Slytherins entered their names, but most of his yearmates seemed to be above that. The one thing he felt grateful for was that he knew Draco hadn't done it, since he'd been so occupied, first with the potion and then wrestling with the consequences of the gift of empathy.

"Ow," Draco said beside him, as if sensing his thoughts.

"Who is it this time?" Harry muttered at him from the side of his mouth, not taking his eyes off Dumbledore.

"Blaise again." Draco whispered the name. Blaise was just two seats down from Harry, on the other side of Millicent. "Droopy. Weepy. A brewing black thunderstorm of melancholy." He paused. "Come on, Harry, let me make fun of him."

"You'd have to explain how you knew," said Harry, and sipped at his porridge.

"I would not. I'm a Slytherin. He'd just assume that I figured out he was mooning over somebody from keen observation."

"Maybe he had bad news from home," said Harry, shaking his head. Granted, he wasn't the empath, but he didn't see how Draco could be sure that Blaise's romantic sorrow was, well, romantic, and not the result of some tragedy. "And I think you need to work on your shielding."

"Hush it, Potter," Pansy snapped, leaning around Draco's shoulder and frowning at him. "They're about to announce whose names will come out of the Goblet to compete in the Tournament."

Harry narrowed his eyes. Pansy's face was flushed, her eyes brighter than they appeared to be normally.

"Tell me you didn't put your name in the Goblet," he said.

Pansy flushed more deeply and turned her back on him to face Dumbledore.

Harry rolled his eyes. Merlin, what does she want? It's not like her family needs the money. The attention? Honestly, who would?

"The Goblet of Fire creates a binding magical contract on the wizards and witches whose names emerge," Dumbledore was saying. "That means that, if someone's name comes out of the Goblet, that person must compete in the Tournament." He paused, but he'd done too good a job promoting this Tournament as something exciting and not dangerous, Harry thought. Most of the students still watched eagerly as Dumbledore tapped a large chest in front of him three times with his wand and took out a rough wooden goblet.

The top was burning with blue flame, and Harry, his eyes squinting against the sudden blaze of magic that the Goblet had brought into the room, had to admit that that more than made up for its

appearance. Dumbledore held out his hand, and a scrap of parchment emerged from the flames and settled into his palm.

“The champion for Durmstrang,” he read out, his voice loud and confident, “is Viktor Krum.”

The Durmstrang students broke into cheers, and Harry blinked as the Quidditch player he remembered from the World Cup stood and shouldered his way forward to the head table. Dumbledore spoke with him softly for a moment, and Krum nodded and walked through a door into a small side room leading off the Hall.

Once again, the Goblet gave a name into Dumbledore’s hand, and this time he smiled, as though he’d had something personally to do with the selection. “The champion for Beauxbatons,” he said, “is Fleur Delacour.”

Harry saw one of the part-Veela girls rise in a cloud of shimmering silver hair. Subdued, butterfly-like applause trailed her as she walked up to the head table. Harry caught a glimpse of her face, and was reminded of Narcissa the first time he had met her. Fleur, though, had let a hint of nervous excitement color her cheeks. Dumbledore spoke with her slightly longer than he had with Krum before sending her into the small side room.

Harry noticed most of the students around him leaning forward. Draco was rubbing his forehead and murmuring something about “bloody excitement headache.”

“He hasn’t announced the Hogwarts champion yet,” Pansy murmured. “I still have a chance.”

“For Merlin’s sake,” said Harry, but a glance at their faces showed that no one was paying attention to him. He shook his head and finished his porridge, as the Goblet seemed to deliberate on the final name before shooting another scrap of parchment into Dumbledore’s hand.

“And the champion for Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said, “is Connor Potter.”

Harry felt himself gasp, which caused him to choke on his porridge. He heard cries of interest, cries of outrage, and at least one foot-stomping fit of disappointment from Pansy. Beside him, Millicent had gone silent and intent, and Draco stared across the room at Connor.

“But he didn’t put his name in the Goblet, I thought,” he said.

Harry gained control of his choking, and swiveled his head to look at his brother, his heart going crazy in his chest. Connor’s face was pale. He stared at the Headmaster with a look that did not seem to crave either fame or fortune. That look said that he didn’t know what the hell was going on.

“Come forward, now, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore was saying. “When one’s name emerges from the Goblet of Fire, one is bound to compete in the Triwizard Tournament.”

One look at Dumbledore’s face, which was still smiling serenely, and not at all concerned that he was putting the Boy-Who-Lived in the way of danger, convinced Harry that Dumbledore had planned this.

The bloody bastard.

Even as his twin hesitantly stood and made his way up to the head table, Harry was letting his magic go. Dumbledore looked abruptly in Harry’s direction just before Connor reached him. Harry narrowed his eyes and inclined his head. Beneath his hand, the remnants of the porridge in his bowl had turned to ice.

We need to talk, Dumbledore.

As though he’d heard the words in Harry’s thoughts, Dumbledore nodded, and spoke kindly with Connor for a moment, ignoring the way that Harry’s twin desperately shook his head. A few moments later, Connor put his head down and trooped unhappily into the side room.

“I will converse with our champions for a few moments, and tell them what to expect,” Dumbledore announced to the room, as the Goblet

of Fire's flames went out, and he tucked it back into the chest in front of him. "After that, I will be in my office in case anyone wishes to speak with me." His gaze lingered on Harry for a moment, and then he turned and swept out of the Hall.

Harry glared after him, and then Draco was tugging on his arm and muttering, "Come on, Harry, calm down. You're giving me a headache here."

Harry blinked, startled out of his rage. "I thought my magic didn't give you a headache any more," he said, glancing at his friend.

"Not your magic, your fury," said Draco plainly. "Come on. There's nothing you can do about it for right now. I'll walk you to the Headmaster's office." He tugged on Harry's arm again.

Harry nodded, and stood. He did think it was funny, as they left amid the buzz of curiosity and interest and unease from other students in the Hall, that the one person whose expression seemed to match his was Moody's. He had just destroyed his goblet with what looked like a modified Blasting Curse, as though intensely upset that Connor's name had come out of the Goblet.

Harry tensed when he saw Dumbledore coming up the corridor towards them. Draco, who'd been standing beside him but saying nothing, tensed too, and laid his unmarked hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Just be calm," he whispered.

Harry could not be calm, though. His gaze was fixed on the Headmaster, and he couldn't seem to remove it. Rage had given way to something more dangerous, a mixture of glazed ice and dark, shifting water that altered from moment to moment. Distrust and disgust were the foremost emotions in it, but they were mixed with others, among them the abiding conviction that he would not forgive Dumbledore this mistake.

"Ah, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I think that you should go and comfort your brother after this interview. He did seem somewhat upset about

having to compete in the Tournament, though he understands, now, that there's no way that he can back out." He smiled at Harry.

Bloody bastard. He isn't even pretending that he had nothing to do with it! I just—I don't understand—

"Why?" Harry whispered, and knew his voice was shaking.

"Because," said Dumbledore gently, "Connor needs a test of his own, an arena in which he can shine. He has become less noticed this year than he ever was. At least, when he was in the storm of crisis that his accusations against you last year and the year before created, he was learning how to weather the fame and the expectations that came with being the Boy-Who-Lived. But now, Harry, whose name is in the newspapers? Who in your family is the focus of attention?"

Harry couldn't quite mask a wince. His oldest instincts shrieked that this was wrong, that he shouldn't be taking time and attention away from Connor. His training in defensive magic had been quite heavy on spells that would protect his brother without attracting notice by their flashiness. And now he'd been flashy and not even realized it.

He took a deep breath. He bore the guilt, he knew he did. He would deal with it later, though. He needed to say this. "His life is in danger in the Tournament. He could be killed."

"He has at least as much a chance as the other champions, I would say," Dumbledore murmured. "And more than most. Why wouldn't he? He is the Boy-Who-Lived, and most people accept that he must be a wondrously powerful wizard, to have defeated Voldemort."

Harry opened his mouth to answer, and found himself stymied again. If he claimed he was more powerful than Connor, then he was saying the kind of thing his training made him intensely uncomfortable with saying. And if he said Connor was more powerful, it was a blatant lie.

He found himself hissing at Dumbledore, and the Many hissed back comfortingly from his arm.

"We may bite this one, at least?"

"No," Harry insisted, and then turned back to the Headmaster instead of listening to the Many having a sulk. "I don't understand why you would do this," he bit out. "You must know that your favored interpretation of the prophecy is in danger if he is."

"I trust that you will protect him, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Thanks to his brother, he has survived worse dangers."

Harry closed his eyes. "You're trying to tangle me up again," he said. "Keep me busy."

"Yes, he is," Draco breathed against the back of his neck, so softly that Harry almost could not hear him. "His emotions are saying so. He was a bit surprised that you figured it out."

Harry opened his eyes quickly, but if Dumbledore had ever actually looked surprised, it was gone now. "The Goblet has chosen," he said. "The Tournament must proceed. Connor will succeed, Harry. You'll see. And this will give him a chance to step, at last, out of his brother's long shadow."

Harry came very close to hating Dumbledore then. He watched in silent rage as the Headmaster whispered the password to the gargoyle and it sprang aside. Dumbledore put one foot on the staircase beyond, and then paused.

"Oh, I had almost forgotten," he said, and drew an envelope from his pocket. "This came for you this morning, Harry. It's the letter I want you to answer." He tossed it to Harry, who caught it automatically.

"Why should I?" Harry had to ask, since his magic was trembling, as eager as the Many, to be let out and attack Dumbledore. "Why should I, when you've broken our truce by dragging Connor into this damn Tournament?"

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. "Why, Harry," he said, "this letter has nothing to do with our earlier truce. It is the culmination of a promise you made me for quite a different reason, don't you remember?"

Harry did. The Minister gone, and Snape free. If Dumbledore voted to keep Fudge in office and to send Snape to prison, then Harry was fairly certain the rest of the Wizengamot would follow him.

If they knew...

But if they were to have proof of what Dumbledore had done, then they would need to know how Harry knew these things, and they would have to dig up the whole sorry story, and that would hurt other people and bring attention to focus on some aspects of his life that Harry could not bear to have exposed.

"I hate you," he whispered to Dumbledore, and slipped the letter into the pocket of his robes, and went to find Connor, Draco hot on his heels.

Albus watched Harry go with a slight frown. The boy had reacted more violently than he had hoped or expected to the inclusion of his brother in the Triwizard Tournament.

I thought he would understand, he mused as he climbed the stairs to his office. He is the one who wished to play in politics. He was the one who went to Slytherin. He should be well used to the necessity of testing someone. And since Connor did not actually defeat Tom either when he was a baby or last year, and I highly suspect that he did not in the Chamber, either, he must grow stronger. There must be a reckoning. At least this will not be the fatal kind. And Harry should have known that I would use those words against him.

Harry needs to learn love and forgiveness, I know that. But sometimes he acts as if he had too much compassion already. I do not understand it.

Ah, well. This is his brother. We trained him long enough, Lily and I, to love Connor to the exclusion of all else. Albus nodded, accepting that his foresight had failed because he had forgotten the bond between the twins. I should have known he would snap at me like this.

But Harry would keep his promise, or he would have destroyed the letter with fire already. He would read it. He would reply. And that meant he would be taking the first step on a long, long road to becoming the kind of leader they would truly need, since he had told Albus the possibility of his fulfilling a different role in the prophecy.

Harry will understand, when he reads what she has written. Harry didn't even need to wait before entering Gryffindor Tower. Ron was watching for him, and let him in, with only the faintest glare of distaste at Draco.

"Where is he?" Harry asked, looking around the common room and finding no Connor there.

"Upstairs." Ron gestured with his head. "He's locked the door and won't let anyone else talk to him. It's pretty bad, mate."

Harry nodded and turned to the stairs.

"Harry?"

Harry glanced back at Ron, and found him frowning, biting one knuckle. Ron waited. Harry waited.

Ron broke first, and said, "Are you sure that he didn't put his name in the Goblet? He says he didn't, but..." He shrugged, as though to say that he would not have given up the opportunity to pursue such fame and fortune himself, danger or no danger.

Harry quelled the temptation to snap. Ron was Ron, and he wanted to distinguish himself. With his family and the block on his magic, which Harry had sensed was still there all through the lessons in spells that he had given him, it made sense. And if he thought Connor had been lying to him, he would be understandably upset.

"I'm sure," said Harry quietly. "He's been occupied with something else, an argument he's been having with our dad by letter."

Ron's face clouded, even as he nodded. "I know what that's like," he said darkly. "Percy's still a git, and won't come work with our dad."

Harry hesitated, but Percy's secret wasn't his to tell. He just inclined his head and went up the stairs. Draco laid a hand on his shoulder all the way up, and Harry forced himself not to throw it off. It didn't feel bad, really, just temping, and he couldn't afford to give in to temptation right now.

He knocked on the door to the fourth-year boys' room, and received an angry shout from behind it.

"I told you I didn't want to talk to anyone!"

"Too bad," Harry muttered, and undid the locking charms that Connor had put on the door with a few twitches of his will. He stepped in, and had to duck the pillow that Connor threw at him. It caught Draco full in the face, though.

"Merlin, Potter," Draco said, wiping dust off his cheeks. "Do you chase the house elves away from your bed just so that you can have the pleasure of lying around in your own filth?"

Connor's face flushed. He'd already been crying, and now he started scrabbling for his wand among the bedcovers.

"So help me, Draco," Harry said in an undertone, "talk to him again, and I'll hurt you." He stepped forward before Draco could say anything to that, and grasped his brother's wrist. Connor tried to jerk away.

Harry wouldn't let him, turning him around and wrapping him in an embrace instead. Connor closed his eyes tightly and held onto him with strength that Harry recognized as desperate. That didn't bother him. In fact, he could feel himself truly relaxing for the first time in a week. This, he didn't have to do research on, the way that he did with the Parseltongue book that Arabella had sent him, or on house elf webs. This, he could do something about immediately, and help someone else. That was the only thing that truly made him feel at ease.

"It's all right, Connor," he breathed into his brother's hair. "I'll help you. I'll help you find spells to survive the Tasks, whatever they are. I know that you didn't put your name in the Goblet, and I know that you didn't want fame and glory." And his brother didn't, he was convinced. Connor had been too busy trying to put himself together again after Sirius's death to crave this kind of thing. "I won't let you die."

Connor gripped his shoulders for a moment. "You don't think I'm cowardly, to be afraid?" he whispered.

"You didn't want this," said Harry. "How is that cowardly?"

"I got a lecture," Connor muttered, pulling away enough to wipe at his face. "From some of the upper years, especially this fellow named McLaggen. I should show courage, what was I crying for, I was going to make the other Houses think Gryffindor was wet, and so on."

Harry sighed. "Well, they will expect you to show up for events with the other champions, and smile and look cheerful about it," he said. Connor's hazel eyes were clearer now, and he did seem more relaxed, both of which made Harry feel more cheerful. "But you can do that, right? I mean, you did it first year when you got chosen for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and that was unusual."

"But now I don't feel like it," said Connor. "Sometimes I get tired of being the Boy-Who-Lived all the bloody time."

Harry felt Draco shift, as though he were going to say something, but he thankfully didn't and make Harry have to hurt him. Harry smiled gently at his brother and brushed the hair back from his heart-shaped scar.

"I know," he whispered. "And you'll always have me to talk to, me to lean on, if it gets to be too much. I mean it, Connor. I love you, and I'll be here for you."

Connor's eyes cleared completely, and he nodded, slowly, as though he needed to feel each separate part of the motion. "That's what I keep telling Dad," he said. "That's what we're arguing about. I keep

telling him that he's being an idiot for not trusting you to know your own mind and backing off Snape. He keeps writing back—oh, all kinds of things, that Snape has corrupted you and you should have more loyalty to your blood family and so on.” Connor shrugged, his face growing mulish, but, thankfully, no longer closed, the way it had been before when Harry tried to talk to him about James. “He’s an idiot. I wish he was here so he’d eat his words. But don’t worry. I’ll tell him about this, unless you would rather I’d not.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. “No, it’s fine. Thank you, Connor.” He hugged his brother on the shoulders this time, and pulled away with a pat on his back. “And you’ll come to me if you need my help, right?”

Connor nodded. “I promise.”

“Good.” Harry turned around again, and saw Draco watching them both with an odd expression on his face. Harry blinked and peered at him. It looked like jealousy. Harry shook his head. He had no clue why. Surely Draco had to know that if he were in the same kind of trouble, Harry would help him the same way? And he was an empath now, and should be able to feel Connor’s sincere pain and agony.

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do,” he told Connor, and, on receiving a smile from his twin, left in contentment—

Or as much contentment as he could find, with the letter burning a hole in his pocket.

Harry took a deep breath and slowly opened the envelope. He had a suspicion as to who it would be from. That was the reason he’d, according to Draco, “been radiating anxiety that would drown the Giant Squid,” and the reason that he’d gently refused company while he read the letter. Draco had finally, reluctantly, backed off, and let Harry come to the Owlery alone to read it.

There, amid the gentle shiftings and shufflings of the birds, with the honesty-charmed parchment he’d borrowed from Dumbledore earlier in the week beside him, Harry looked down and read the letter he’d known, in the back of his mind, would be coming.

Dear son:

I imagine that you never expected to hear from me again. What else could there be to say between us? You made your feelings clear when you took away my magic. And you probably thought I had made mine clear with the betrayal I inflicted upon you.

No, you have not been blinded, or charmed. The only charm on this parchment insures my complete honesty. It was a betrayal, and I can see it now, in that light. I have had much time to think, Harry—nearly a year.

For months afterward, yes, I raged and plotted as to how to get you back under my control. That was the reason I told Connor to compel you if nothing else would answer. But around May, I got past that. The news of Sirius's death and how you had saved your brother yet again, which Albus told me of, helped open my eyes to the fact that pain other than my own existed in the world.

Albus also told me of your changed position in regards to the prophecy.

Harry, I cannot say that I regret everything I did in the past, because this parchment is forcing me to be honest. I can say that I would do it all differently now. I did not realize the truth about what happened the night of the attack. If I had, then I would have helped you train your magic so that you could fight Voldemort, not bound it and caged it. I would have helped you become the Boy-Who-Lived, not the guardian of the one I thought was the Boy-Who-Lived. I would have helped you accept your possible death in the light of being a hero, rather than being a sacrifice.

As it is, I accept that I cannot have my magic back. I would like to know my sons again—the young men Albus says they have become in the wake of May's events. I read of you only in the newspapers now, and a terror and a thrill touches me, that the sons I raised have become so formidable.

Harry, will you let me greet you on a new footing, one where I know what you are and what you can do? Will you consent to see me

again? The justice ritual prevents us from meeting because you said that you did not want to see me again, but that part can be reversed, even though the loss of my magic cannot be. This distance between us was something you required, not a reparation from me, and a prohibition that has affected you as much as me. If you change your mind, we can see each other once more.

Please write back.

Love,

Lily.

Harry closed his eyes. He sat in silence for a long time, save for the brush of wings above him as owls came and went.

Then he drew out the honesty-charmed parchment—how glad he was, right now, that he didn't have to go to Dumbledore's office and borrow some—and composed his reply, intensely glad that no one was there to see him, and the way his hand shook.

This is for Snape, he told himself, again and again.

It was the only way he got through the letter.

Interlude: The Hardest Letter He Ever Wrote

Lily:

I don't know where to begin. I don't know if I should write a true response to the letter you sent, or simply record my emotions about you as they flow forth from my quill. At least the parchment insures that these words will be honest.

And yes, I did check the parchment for charms and curses before I used it.

I suppose I can begin with the notion of sacrifice. There are times I hate what you made me. Someone very wise said—things to me recently that make a lot of sense, as much as I hate to admit it. I don't like thinking about them, but one of them was that I consider everyone else worthy of love and forgiveness, but myself. And I suppose that's true. And if that's a result of your training, then—

But no, I can't write that, because I don't believe it. I suppose this parchment works after all.

I think it may be a result of your training, but I've become someone who does put other people before myself. I can admit that much. And that is a good thing. It must be. How can it not be? You trained me to be a weapon, a sacrifice, the guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived, and I think if you had stopped there, it would have been enough, and I would have been what you wished me to be. But you also put on the phoenix web, and that meant I broke free and turned my attention elsewhere, because I felt unduly constrained. So I feel the same way about most of the wizards around me that I used to feel about Connor. And the magical creatures, too.

I am what you made me, always.

Is that evil?

My skills are what have won me allies. My knowledge of the pureblood dances gave me ways to approach those allies. My defensive magic helped save Connor's and Draco's lives in first year,

and then other people in the years after that. Being left wide open to Voldemort gave me the magic that made you fear me and introduce the phoenix web, and that means that I broke free, and that means that I turned my attention to other people.

I already wrote that.

Perhaps this parchment brings forth ideas that are very strong more than once? I know already that it forces me to write what I honestly believe. I can write something I am sure is true, and something I'm not sure is true—I tried on other pieces of it—but I can't write something I'm sure is false.

All right, then. Here it is.

I find myself unsure if I forgive you. And then I think about my allies.

Lucius Malfoy tortured three Muggleborn children to death, because they were born possessing magic, and weren't of a pureblood line. That's all. That's the only crime they committed. And I have never upbraided him for it. In fact, I've progressed very far with him in a truce-dance, almost to the final step.

Hawthorn Parkinson was a mistress of blood curses, and cursed Jacob Smith with a blood-letting spell that replenished his blood even as it cut new wounds and opened them again and again, wounds that should have killed him in a few hours. He bled to death for days, screaming as he did so, and the healers in St. Mungo's could do nothing for him. He lived for three weeks before he died. Hawthorn has never said that she regrets that. And I've brewed a potion that she needs for her since last year, and I made a formal alliance with her not long after I met her.

Adalrico Bulstrode was suspected of helping Voldemort design the Black Plague curse. How many lives did that claim? How many Aurors did it raze? How many children died choking to death on the spores? Adalrico has never mentioned that at all. And I've also made formal alliance with him, and sit calmly enough beside his daughter at the Slytherin table.

They did far worse than you have. They hurt other people, which is what I have said I cannot stand. And yet I let the memory of the justice they more than likely deserve lapse. I have told myself that one cannot win justice for the dead, and that it was in the War, when all sides did horrible things, and that I am supposed to have compassion, and shouldn't I forgive them?

Then, if I forgive them, how can I not forgive you? You left Connor exposed to the Dark Lord, and lied to him, and did not train him as you should have, if he was really to be the Boy-Who-Lived. But that is of a piece with their crimes, and with Dumbledore's.

And Lucius loves his son, and Hawthorn has looked at me with kind eyes, and Adalrico has celebrated with me.

And you did what you did in the name of war, in the name of saving the world.

Nothing is ever simple. You taught me to see that at a young age. I thank you for that. I do not think it is a lesson that either Dumbledore or Voldemort ever truly learned.

How can those two kinds of things exist in the same person? But they do. And I will not betray all that I am, all that you made me, by saying that Lucius Malfoy's love for his son is false, or that all your decisions must have been wrong and made in the knowledge that you were doing wrong, simply because I am uncomfortable with one truth or the other.

I do not know if I can forgive you yet, especially since I was not the only one you hurt, and there is the betrayal that you inflicted on me by trying to renew the phoenix web. But if we are speaking only of the crimes against me...

You made me what I am.

You may have saved the world in doing so.

You made me someone who can gain allies in doing so.

And all the time, I know that perhaps I am only forgiving you because you have raised me to forgive all crimes against myself. I know what the source of this feeling is, but that does not stop it. And thus I embody contradictions of my own.

My feelings regarding you will never be simple, and anyone who thinks they are is a fool, including me, if I ever thought it.

I cannot see you yet. I still can't do that. And part of me says that that's fine and only fair, and part of me says that that's weakness, but the parchment only compels me to write what's true, not what's right.

I can think about the things this wise person said to me, but I can't believe all of them. Not yet. And some I know are false, or a consequence of her not understanding everything that she saw.

I've missed you. I've hated you. I've mourned for you. I've called you Muggle in my thoughts, and Mum to please Connor. Nothing is ever simple.

Nothing ever should be.

Regards,

Harry.

Chapter Thirty: Decus

Harry let out a long, shivering breath, and closed his eyes.

I will not destroy half of Hogwarts, I will not destroy half of Hogwarts...

He stood there until his shaking and his magic ebbed. He finally had to resort to tucking some of his rage behind Occlumency shields, but it worked. He opened his eyes and breathed deeply.

He gave Dumbledore's gargoyle one last look, and could have sworn it cowered. Then he set off back to the dungeons, hoping no one would accost him. His strides were long and angry, but his magic was only surging around him like a brushfire part of the time. That meant someone might try to talk.

And Harry was really, really in no mood for any conversation not conducted at a shout.

He'd confronted Dumbledore just a few minutes ago, trying to claim that the terms of the truce they'd sworn meant Dumbledore could not have put Connor in the Tournament and kept his agreement with Harry, so he should withdraw him at once. And Dumbledore had had the nerve to smile at him, and say, "Why, Harry, do you not remember that you also agreed to train Connor? This is part of that. I am not endangering him. Not with you here. I know that you would prevent any permanent harm from coming to him."

And since Dumbledore believed that, and Harry knew he would die before he let one of the Tasks destroy his brother, and nothing in the truce said that Harry could not risk his own life—freely and willingly—there the matter lay. Under the terms of the truce, this was not a threat, because it was not something Harry could not protect Connor from, and it fulfilled one of the conditions that Harry himself had offered in exchange for Dumbledore's help.

On a technicality, it does, Harry thought, aiming a savage kick at the wall, and then wincing when he saw the patch of stone he'd aimed his foot for frost over. But then, the bloody bastard thrives on

technicalities—technicalities of consent and webs and laws and Light magic.

He ran a hand through his hair. He knew that part of the reason he was upset came from his mother's letter, and part of the reason from his nightmares, which refused to leave him alone whenever he slept, and another part from the newly added stress of helping Connor to train for the Tournament. None of that meant he had any excuse to go around kicking walls.

Hush. Hush. Be at peace. Relax. You have to meet Connor in the library in an hour to talk with him about what the First Task might be. He said he might have some clues from listening to the older students talk.

And he couldn't shout then.

What he really wanted, Harry had to admit as he growled the password to the door of the Slytherin common room, barely waiting until it opened, was someone to shout at, someone who fully deserved it and wouldn't just smile and deflect him with talk of legal technicalities like Dumbledore.

He climbed the stairs to the fourth-year boys' room, only grunting when Millicent called up to him.

"Harry. I mean it."

Harry blinked and turned his head to regard her. He hadn't been aware that she'd said anything more than his name. "What?"

Millicent tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at him. "Some more food at dinner tonight, I think," she said. "You still haven't been eating enough. You haven't since the announcement of the Tournament."

"That's because it's rather hard to force things down past clenched teeth and a throat filled with bile."

Millicent shrugged at him. "Whatever, Potter. You'll eat tonight. And I meant what I said. That bedroom has sounded like a war zone for the

last ten minutes. On your head be it if you go in there. I'm not nursing you back to health if you get caught in an Unforgivable." She turned back to a thick book that Harry recognized as her History of Magic text.

Harry looked up the stairs. Now that he was listening, Millicent was right: He could hear crashing sounds, quickly muffled spells, and what sounded like thumps and yelps coming from their room.

He almost snarled with anticipation as he sped up the stairs and opened the door. Perfect.

He was just in time to see Draco duck a hex from Blaise's wand, pop up again, and croon, "Oh, does Blaise-Waisy love someone from Gryffindor? That would explain the little lions you've been drawing on your homework."

"I do not draw lions on my homework, you insufferable prat!" Blaise was more flustered than Harry had ever seen him; the very fact that he'd drawn his wand testified to that. He flung a Jelly-Legs Jinx, which Draco also rolled under. He was moving close to the table beside his bed, Harry saw, and in a moment he had his wand in his hand and could scramble up to face Blaise on equal footing. Neither one of them had even noticed Harry come in, seemingly.

"You do so," said Draco, who was beaming and smug in the way that only certain knowledge made him. He's used his knowledge of Blaise's emotions, Harry realized. He really was brooding over a crush. "Or, wait, perhaps not. Perhaps I mistook the little hearts for them."

Blaise let out a shriek that ended with, "Abicio!" Draco cast a Shield Charm in front of him to take the edge off the Flinging Hex, and looked proud as Blaise's spell dissipated into nothingness.

"Shut your bloody mouth, Malfoy," Blaise said next, his voice deepening. Harry studied his face, and saw his mother there, one of the few times he ever had. Blaise was dangerously angry, and it really was about time to intervene. "It's none of your bloody business who I crush on."

“But you do admit to crushing on someone!” Draco performed an impromptu little dance. Harry was Draco’s friend, he really was, but just about then, he understood why Ron might want to strangle him.

“At least I admit it,” Blaise spat. “That’s more than you do, huh, Draco? Not that you could admit it. You’ll probably pine yourself to death before you do something about it, because you’re afraid, aren’t you? You don’t realize that you—“

“Petrificus Total—“ Draco began, a look of transcendent rage on his face.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry cut in, shaking his head at himself for waiting so long to intervene. He caught both wands as they soared towards him, and raised his eyebrows when Draco and Blaise spun around as one to scowl at him. “That will be quite enough from both of you,” he said. He gave Draco a warning glare as he opened his mouth. “Now. Why don’t you apologize to each other? Then I’ll return your wands.” He had to admit that he was hoping they wouldn’t apologize. He wanted to yell at someone.

“I won’t,” said Draco predictably. “Merlin, Harry, did you hear him? He was mocking me!”

Harry narrowed his eyes as his anger chose a target. “Draco,” he said. “You have an unfair advantage.” Can I not leave him alone for an hour without him starting to poke people? He should know better than to use his empathy like that. Draco was much better than he had been the last few months, Harry had to admit, but he was far from perfect, and this fight showed how far.

“I don’t care!” said Draco. “He mocked me.” He waited and looked at Harry, and after a moment, Harry realized he was waiting for a sign that his suffering was shared, that his best friend was on his side.

Harry wasn’t, not this time. He shook his head at Draco, and then turned to Blaise. “Look, I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re right. It’s none of our business who you crush on.” He tossed Blaise’s wand back. “Just don’t curse him, all right? He’ll be impossible to live with if you do.”

Blaise gave Harry a hard glance, but nodded and slipped his wand into his robe pocket. "Always the peacemaker, aren't you, Potter?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "Not always. Draco and I are about to have a little chat that should prove quite spirited." Especially, Harry noted, looking at Draco out of the corner of his eye, since he shows no sign of admitting he was wrong. "Do you mind leaving, Blaise?"

Blaise shook his head. "It beats me how you put up with him," he muttered, as he grabbed his Defense Against the Dark Arts homework and took his leave. "Or how you're ever going to put up with him later."

Harry blinked, wondering what that meant, then let it slide with another shrug. He tipped the door shut behind Blaise with his foot, then faced Draco.

"It wasn't my fault," Draco said immediately, before Harry could start. "He was lying there sighing, and I could feel all his bloody emotions! What else was I supposed to do?"

"Not pick at him?" Harry suggested between clenched teeth.

"He wouldn't stop," said Draco, and sulked at him.

"I don't care," said Harry. "You promised me that you would work on this, Draco, that you'd try to learn how to use your empathy, and not just take advantage of how it allows you to view other people's emotions. What possessed you? You've been doing—rather well so far." He had been. No, it wasn't perfect, but he'd managed to resist picking on Blaise for almost two weeks.

Draco muttered something Harry couldn't make out.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Louder, Draco. I don't think the ghosts of Malfoys past would like their descendant to mumble."

That pointed reference to Julia brought Draco's eyes, and his temper, up. "I said that I was lonely," he said harshly. "And tired. And that my forehead hurt. Your scar's bleeding even when you're awake now, isn't it?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. No, he isn't going to do this to me, not tip the ground from beneath my feet. "Yes, as a matter of fact, it has been," he said coolly. "That doesn't mean that you need to—"

"When were you planning to tell me this?"

Harry hissed. "Sometime. I honestly didn't think of telling you, Draco. I wasn't holding back on purpose. And we were talking about you and the misuse of your magic."

"We were talking about you, too," said Draco. "Don't you get it, Harry? I'm better when you're around, at least when you're being honest with me, because then I can concentrate on your emotions. But when you're not, then I get bored. And Blaise was emoting all over the place. Did you really expect me to pass up an opportunity like that?"

"Not yet," Harry admitted grudgingly. "But having me around as a means of controlling your empathy is a crutch, Draco, one that we've got to wean you of."

"Now you're using mixed metaphors."

Harry let magic shimmer out of his shields, run up and down his shoulders. "And that's a sign of impossible ill breeding, I suppose?"

Draco, to Harry's astonishment, closed his eyes and released a huffy little breath. Then he opened his eyes and said, as calmly as he could, "Look, if you want me to get used to using this empathy alone, I think you'd better adjust the shields. They're thinning, or something. I'm getting more emotions than I used to, but they're only the negative ones, irritation and annoyance and anger and so on. And right now I'm feeling your rage, and growing defensive about it, and that just makes me angrier, and that will feed you. Now that I'm an empath, I can't afford to argue about everything under the sun."

Harry winced, and let his magic relax, guilty for forgetting that.

“Stop feeling guilt, will you?” Draco muttered, sitting down on his bed and staring expectantly at Harry. “And get inside my head. Bloody shields. Bloody empathy. Bloody Blaise with his bloody crush.”

“Does your mother know you kiss her with that mouth?” Harry answered, but took a seat on the bed in front of Draco. Inexplicably, he was feeling better than he had been when he came from Dumbledore’s office, for all that he hadn’t yelled at Draco until he spent the anger. Just the fact of being able to argue normally with his best friend relaxed him, he thought. He’d missed that the most in the last few months, more than being touched or the inane conversations that he and Draco used to have about Quidditch and homework. He’d missed the idea that he could say almost anything to Draco and have it answered somehow, that here was someone with whom he could be honest and whom it would be very, very hard to drive away.

Draco raised an eyebrow, and Harry realized he’d just been sitting there, hands on the sides of Draco’s face, looking at him and not doing anything. He gave a small, embarrassed cough, and then murmured, “Legilimens.”

He passed into Draco’s head again, and found it more ordered than it had been the last time he’d done this, Halloween night, when the constant chaos of emotions had barely made him able to distinguish the forms of the rooms that housed Draco’s thoughts. Now he could see the grand and graceful home again, and he relaxed further. This was somewhat like the Sanctuary of Peter’s imagining, but more calming by far to Harry. No one was looking at him with Seer’s eyes here. Of course, he was never going to visit the Sanctuary and have people look at him anyway. No, he could feel Draco in every corner, and that was what soothed him.

Carefully, he checked the shields on the empathy. Some of them were indeed wearing thin. Harry adjusted them, smoothing out the rents and moving them so that some of the more pleasant emotions could get through to Draco, too. At last he nodded and backed away, cautiously pleased to note that a few threads of white had mingled with the quicksilver. His shields were quicksilver from Snape’s

teaching, but the white was new. Draco was gaining control of the shields—spinning himself into them, at least a bit.

He turned around again, and frowned when he realized a barrier of carved wood blocked his way back out of Draco's mind. Then he shrugged. He supposed it was something Draco really wanted him to feel, just as he'd wanted Harry to feel how sorry and angry at himself he was on Halloween. Harry stepped forward and put his hand on the barrier, gently pushing it out of the way and passing his fingers through it at the same time, so that he could identify it.

Intense, lazy warmth, the kind that came on a good morning in late spring when all one had to do was lie in bed and not rise for hours yet, while the sunlight crept in through the window...

Harry was past it in a moment, stunned, but coherent enough to think, So Blaise was right. Draco does have a crush.

He shook his head and popped out of Draco's mind back into his own, smiling gently at his friend. "Congratulations," he said. "Who's your crush?"

"That wasn't a crush," said Draco, his eyes narrowing at once. "That was love, you idiot."

Harry grinned, not letting himself pause to think of how long it had been since he smiled like that. Of course he'd think so. He's a Malfoy. Crushes are for other people. "Of course it is," he said solemnly. "So, tell me. Who's it focused on? Lucky girl? Or lucky boy?"

Draco just stared at him with his mouth open. Then he said, "I can't believe you," and stalked over to his school trunk, all offended dignity.

Harry shrugged. Guess he doesn't want to talk about it after all. And I've got to meet Connor in the library, anyway.

He stood and left. Draco ignored him the entire time. Apparently, it would be a while before he forgave Harry for bringing up a crush that he didn't want to talk about, or perhaps for assuming it was a crush.

That's all right. I don't think our disagreements will last forever, any more. That's one thing that's gone right, at least, in the midst of everything else going wrong.

Harry opened one eye, and waited in silence for a time, until he was sure that snores were coming from Blaise's and Vince's and Draco's beds, and not the tense silence that had lain between them for the past hour. He sat up and rubbed a hand over his forehead, cursing softly as he came away with a palmful of blood.

He needed to do something. The peace he'd got from Draco had lasted a shorter time than he thought, once he got to the library and found Connor sporting a black eye. Harry strongly suspected it was from someone still reluctant to believe that Connor really hadn't put his name in the Goblet—or perhaps someone who did think that Connor hadn't done that, and was furious over his being chosen anyway.

He'd questioned his brother, tossed references to other students into the conversation and waited to see if Connor would flinch, done everything but use Legilimency to get the answer as to who they were. Connor had steadfastly remained tight-lipped about the whole thing, saying something about “wanting to fight his own battles.”

Harry supposed, since a Gryffindor-fifth year named Cormac McLaggen had come into dinner sporting a target on his buttocks to which a flying donkey tail constantly tried to attach itself, courtesy of the Weasley twins, that his question was somewhat answered and the offender punished.

But that didn't lessen his sense of helplessness, and the helplessness—muted, so that Draco couldn't sense it and wake up—was not letting him sleep.

Harry stilled abruptly as an idea came to him. I could do that, he decided. I have enough research on it now.

“Dobby!” he called softly. Since Lucius had agreed to let his house elf go free, he shouldn't mind if Dobby answered a call to Hogwarts instead of Malfoy Manor.

A crack, and Dobby appeared beside his bed, peering up with big eyes. Harry was grateful he hadn't immediately started chattering. Of course, given the other times he had appeared in the room and not awakened anybody, perhaps house elves had the ability to cast silencing charms around themselves before they began to speak.

"I think I've learned enough to free you," Harry said quietly.

Dobby's expression changed. If Harry wasn't used to watching house elf faces by now, he would not have seen it. But a burning light that hadn't been there before appeared in the big eyes.

"Dobby would like that very much," the little elf said.

"Good," said Harry. "Could you take me to the Forbidden Forest, though? I don't think I'd better do it here, with all the other house elf webs in Hogwarts. I only think I know how to unbind a frayed one. I wouldn't want to untie theirs by mistake." Not to mention that I don't have the least idea of how to convince Dumbledore to let the Hogwarts house elves go.

Dobby nodded, took a step forward, and clasped a hand around Harry's wrist. Harry endured being squeezed through Apparition with resignation, and found himself in a surprisingly dry and sheltered spot in the Forbidden Forest. He did conjure a Lumos to see Dobby by, and also saw they were in a small cave made of several trees bent and hanging together.

He faced Dobby and let out a little nervous breath, squinting. Dobby's webs at once sprang into being. Now that Harry was looking exclusively at them, he could make out how they wound on and around each other. Yes, there was the web to bind the house elves, and another to insure that they liked slavery. Harry curled his lip in spite of himself.

Then he said, to distract himself from the magic he was building up, "Who was the wizard who partially unbound you, Dobby?"

Dobby blinked his large eyes, finally making Harry realize he hadn't blinked once before that. "Dobby's master's name was Decus," he said.

Harry tilted his head. He recognized the Latin word for "honor" or "glory." "Do you remember what his last name was?"

"Lestrangle."

Harry nearly let his magic go in his surprise, but then shook his head and went on gathering it. He had to weave exact replicas of the webs in front of him, and so he fixed his eyes on them again. Strand to the left, knot just below, strand to the right... "Do you remember why he wanted to unbind your webs?"

"Master Decus wanted to be free," Dobby whispered, his voice yearning. He had transferred his stare to the model of the webs that Harry was building in midair now. "Master Decus was not like other wizards. He had something else inside him, something that was wild and wanted to be free. Dobby does not remember what it was."

"A dragon?" Harry asked softly.

Dobby blinked, and then his eyes sparked. "That was it! Dobby remembers!" He clapped his hands and bobbed his head, his ears flapping against his scalp. "Yes, a dragon. Master Decus said to Dobby, he said, 'Dragons are long-sighted. Dragons cannot be tamed. Dragons are the wildest of all Dark creatures. Remember that, Dobby. Someone someday will need to know it.'"

Harry shivered in spite of himself. Well, Acies was certainly strange enough that Decus could have been a relative of hers. "Do you remember what happened to him?"

Dobby glanced up at Harry solemnly. "Master Decus started to lose his mind. The dragon inside him was too wild. It made him do things that Master Decus did not want to do, oh, such wicked terrible things!" Dobby abruptly covered his mouth with one hand and mumbled indistinct words around it.

“What?” Harry asked, glancing back and forth from the webs he was building to the webs he was imitating. “It’s all right, Dobby, you can tell me. I’m hardly about to tell anyone else.”

“Dobby is a bad house elf,” Dobby said, taking his hand away. “One must never speak ill of one’s master!”

Harry ground his back teeth together and let his breath come through his mouth and nose both at once. “In a few minutes, Dobby,” he whispered, “you aren’t going to have to worry about that ever again.”

The webs were complete. Harry knew that the fact that his own created webs were perfect copies of the ones that had so long endured on Dobby was not the result of extraordinary skill on his part. The magic had taken over halfway through, creating small intricate knots where Harry would have blinked and peered through his glasses, and fraying the edges in flawless mirror image replica. His sight of the other webs had faded. There were only Dobby’s to worry about now, and what he meant to do with them.

Harry had expected to feel anxious or excited about now, since this was the first time he’d ever removed a web from just one magical creature, instead of tearing it away, as he had from the Dementors. Instead, he felt focused, calm, as though he were walking a path already set out for him.

“Vates,” Dobby breathed.

The word felt like a signal. Harry leaned forward and touched his hands to the webs. He had known what he would have to do from his research, but he hadn’t thought it. His body moved without the guidance of his mind, or before his thoughts.

His hands touched the fraying strands of the webs, and then he vanished inside them.

He no longer stood in the sheltered little cave of trees in the Forbidden Forest, but skimmed down the endless trceries of the web, seeing a clear roof overhead, clear walls racing past him without

end, and an indistinct floor sliding under his feet. As if he rode a knife, he sliced the web cleanly down the middle.

When he looked to the sides, he could see other Harrys riding other knives. He was not sure what web he was actually in, the original or the copy, and it did not seem to matter. What mattered was that he was breaking it.

He came to the first knot, and for a moment, he felt panic. What was he supposed to do with knots, which served as anchors for the web on the free will of the creature they enslaved, and would he be able to remember it in time? He was moving awfully fast.

But his body was already leaping, turning, moving, and then he remembered.

The knots had endured long enough. He could not untie them, as such. And they were too tangled and complicated to find the best thread and simply pull to loosen them.

The best decision was to cut.

Harry pulled up his magic and sent it before him, riding an intense outpouring of will and free will. He was remembering the moment when his own phoenix web had dissolved—the good part of it, the moment in the Owlery when he had fully committed to the vates path, not the moment in the Chamber when Sylarana had died and ripped a good portion of his mind to shreds.

The knot slit apart, and Harry went on sliding through it, bounding up a clear ramp now, slicing through another glassy knot, slipping down a different strand. He became aware that he was laughing. The laughter was not joyous, exactly, but high and hard and proud.

He reached the end of that web, and turned to attack the other one, the one that kept Dobby thinking he liked slavery—

And then he found that that one was gone. He blinked and shook his head, but understood in a moment what had happened. Thinking that

no house elf should ever manage to free his magic first, the wizards who wove the original webs had put the net binding free will under and inside the web on their powers. The house elves went on thinking that they wanted to serve wizards, and so of course they would never use magic against them.

Dobby was free.

Harry caught his breath and dropped back into his own body. He watched Dobby stretch his hands, and shake his head, and flash glances here and there, as though his eyes were truly seeing for the very first time.

Then he looked up at Harry.

Harry gazed back at him. He had expected to feel a little touch or thrill of fear, as he had once when he saw a vision of what Dobby might be, fierce and feral. Instead, he felt only a rush of what he knew was joy this time.

He bowed to Dobby, and moved a few steps backward. If Dobby wanted to vanish right now, then Harry was hardly going to stop him.

Dobby extended his long fingers, instead, and snapped them twice. At once, a cloud of colored lights rose from the ground, formed into bubbles, and drifted around Harry. Harry blinked and focused on them, and blinked again when he realized that each contained a small, intricate scene, each one showing a happy family of some different kind of magical creature. It was magic that a wizard would have been hard-pressed to create in the first place, never mind maintain.

“I thank you, Harry Potter.” Dobby’s voice was deeper, and had entirely lost the cringing tone. “I am free now. I can hear the songs of the Forest. And I know what is coming.”

Harry tore his gaze away from the bubbles, and looked at Dobby. “What is coming?”

Dobby tilted his head back. His ears were shrinking as Harry watched, coming to rest closer to his head, elegant and sharply pointed. "Decus Lestrange committed suicide because he could not control the dragon within himself," he whispered. "Dragons are the wildest of us all. And dragons are coming to Hogwarts. The very night sings of their presence, of their near arrival."

He opened his eyes and looked at Harry again. Already those eyes were different, too, larger and greener and possessed of a cat-like glow. "Dragons cannot be tamed," he said, as if it were a proverb, or a prayer.

Harry felt his breath catch. That's the First Task. Dragons. It must be.

"Even dragons will need their vates," Dobby whispered to him. "They are wild, but they are not free. Beware, though, Harry Potter. Wildness can consume even as it exalts." He looked abruptly past Harry. "And you attract both the consuming and the exalting kind more than most," he added.

Harry turned around.

A thestral stood behind him, long draconic neck extended and nostrils flaring as it sniffed at him. Harry stood still as the creature walked forward, hooves nearly silent even in the deep leaves, and spread its wings around him. Then it licked at his forehead, with a tongue as cool as grave dirt.

Harry started, and then realized that the thestral must have smelled the blood from his scar. He remained still, and let it take what it wanted. Then it stepped back from him, snorted, and extended a wing.

"The thestral wishes Harry Potter to ride," Dobby said.

Harry blinked and glanced at him. "Why? I haven't broken their web yet."

Dobby laughed. His voice was changing, too, becoming deeper and richer with promise, like the neigh of a unicorn or the song of a

phoenix. "Some magical creatures respect you for what you are, Harry Potter," he said. "Some do not need you to break their web to prove yourself worthy of their attention."

The thestral snorted at him and stamped a hoof, which Harry didn't need Dobby to translate. Carefully, he hauled himself onto the thin dark back, clasping the ribs tightly with his legs so he didn't slide off.

The thestral reared. Harry wasn't quite sure how it managed things, but the leaves of the trees above them parted, and Harry was gazing straight up at the stars, and especially the black spaces between them, which he hadn't noticed since Walpurgis Night.

The thestral took off with a powerful kick of its hind legs, and the leaves rushed away, and the earth, and Dobby's laughter.

What came up to take their place was wind, and darkness, and music.

Harry found himself surrounded by song as they arose. He thought part of it came from the stars themselves, as if the act of freeing Dobby gave them voices he could hear. And surely some was the same deep music that he had heard the night he had run in the Forest, the cheerful voice booming from glen to glade, and some was the wind and the exaltation he always felt in the sky.

And some of it was the same song he had heard in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, from the wards and the creature caged behind the closet door.

Let me out.

Harry extended his hands. He was laughing, because he didn't have any choice. The symphony reached right into him and ripped the laughter out. He threw his head back, and felt the wind pass through his hair and soothe—the first time anything had in days—the pain in his scar. As if in answer, it built to a gale, and roared back at him.

The music grew more and more frenzied, and the thestral dipped its wings and swept in a wide circle. Harry could see Hogwarts beneath them, dark and slumbering, and its grounds, and its lake, and the

Forest stretching on, and the curve of the brilliant world rolling beneath.

You might leave, said a voice that did not seem distinguishable from the voice of the music, or the Dark creature in his memory. You might wander the world, setting the magical creatures free and unbinding webs. What obligations have you to lesser wizards? Your power sets you above them. Listen to our song. You might claim us, and we might claim you.

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. His enchantment had not faded, but other impulses were rising to hedge it in.

"I have the same obligations I always did," he whispered. "I could fight Dumbledore, and perhaps win, since he'd not looking for an attack to come from my direction. I could attack and kill my enemies. But I can't. I won't step on their wills, and I don't think of myself as better than they are just because I have more magic."

But you want to, said the eager voice. Some part of you wants to.

Harry shrugged. "It would be simpler," he muttered. "That doesn't mean I'm going to declare myself for the Dark."

The wind went skipping away from him again, and the chorus of singing voices rose from all directions.

For a moment, Harry let himself bathe in the song, and imagine what it could be like if he did become a fully Dark wizard. He wouldn't have to torture and kill anyone, not like Voldemort. He could simply move without restraint, righting the wrongs that everyone less intelligent than he was had put in motion. He could free Snape, and free Connor from this stupid Tournament, and unbind the magical creatures. He could free Muggles from their fear and ignorance of wizards, and free wizards from their fear of Muggles. He had enough magic to set the world going the way he wanted it.

It would be simpler.

Nothing is simple.

Harry felt pain catch at his heart again, and the song lost all attraction for him. He stroked the thestral's neck and murmured, "Down again? Please?"

The winged horse dipped without protest, and landed Harry on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry slid off its back and stood for a moment, leaning against it, taking deep breaths.

It hurt to think of his mother, and what she had written in her letter, and what she would think when she received his back.

But the training she had given him had saved him yet again.

I cannot declare myself for the Dark. That would be too simple.

He allowed himself a few heartbeats more to glory in that vast music, then gave the thestral a pat on the shoulder, let it lick more blood from his scar, and set off, back to the castle and the world of limitations he had chosen.

Chapter Thirty-One: To the Ministry We Go

Harry closed his eyes. He was tired after an evening and a night spent researching ways to defeat dragons with Connor, a nightmare, and then an explanation session about the nightmare with Draco, but he thought he could still manage this. In fact, he thought his exhaustion would probably contribute to his success.

“Expelliarmus,” he whispered aloud, and gestured with one hand.

His wand, which he’d put in the hand of a wooden figure on the other side of the room, flew away from it with great rapidity and vigor. Harry felt a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and was too tired to resist giving it.

Yes. Perfect. My wandless magic really does work better when I confine it to my body than when I let it spread around me. And if it’s not floating around me hitting at the walls like wings and plaguing everyone, that will make life easier for other people, too.

He walked over to retrieve his wand, humming under his breath. He froze when he heard the door creak open behind him, though. So far as he knew, no one else had realized he was here, in a small room in the dungeons where Snape used to take him to practice dueling spells while students had detentions in his offices.

Harry turned fluidly around, clutching his wand, and blinked when he saw Dumbledore standing in the doorway. He stood, but said nothing. He had no idea why the Headmaster had sought him out, and lately, when he initiated confrontations, he always seemed to come off the worse in them anyway. He kept his eyes on Dumbledore’s face and waited.

“Harry, my boy.” Dumbledore nodded to him as if nothing had ever changed. Harry wanted to rage and snap that yes it did, yes it had, but he just inclined his head back. “Ready for our trip to the Ministry this morning, I hope?” Dumbledore continued, looking at the walls of the dungeon room with interest, as though they offered something more than stone starred with damp patches and marked irregularly by flickering shadows from the torches.

“What trip to the Ministry?” Harry shifted one foot behind him. He was poised now, ready to dart in several directions. “I know that today is Fudge’s trial, but I thought you were going to vote no confidence.”

“I am, Harry, I am.” Dumbledore gave him a fleeting smile. “I am satisfied that you have kept up your end of our bargain. Lily has shown me your letter herself.”

Harry roped his magic, which wanted to explode out of his body in several dozen different directions, and nodded.

“But you are required to come with me,” said Dumbledore, with a small sigh and a flap of his hand. “One of those tired formalities that require those involved in bringing the motion before the Wizengamot to be present when it’s debated.”

“But I wasn’t the one who suggested the motion,” Harry argued.

“No, but according to Amelia Bones, you were a large part of the reason that she decided to suggest the vote.”

Harry flushed. He could feel Dumbledore’s mild gaze on him, and that was bad enough. He did not want people in the courtroom pointing at him, and whispering that that was the boy who had caused Fudge to be brought to trial.

“You need not speak,” Dumbledore reassured him. “The formalities do not require you to do that. Only to be present, and if someone does have a mild question, about corroborating factual details perhaps, then you can give your answer to the court scribe. Your participation can be limited.”

Harry relaxed. With the way that Dumbledore had come in here, springing this as a surprise on him, he had been afraid that Dumbledore would spring the greater and far more unpleasant surprise of making him a witness. “Then let me eat breakfast, sir, and I’ll be ready to accompany you,” he said.

"Take all the time in the world, dear boy," Dumbledore said, and stood out of the way. "The trial is set for noon, and since we have special permission to Apparate in to the Ministry, we don't have to take much time getting there. Meet me in my office no later than half past eleven, though."

Harry nodded shortly and edged past Dumbledore. It made his skin crawl when the Headmaster looked at him.

This time, though, he could not imagine that this was some plan of Dumbledore's. Why would it be? Perhaps the Headmaster wanted Harry to witness him voting no confidence, but then inventing this talk of a formality that required him to be there, an easily detected lie, would be pointless. No, probably the formality was real and any benefit that might accrue to Dumbledore from his presence just a side issue.

Harry would make sure to renew his glamours before he entered the court, though, and several other defensive spells he had learned in the past few days, while he and Connor worked on trying to find magic that would fool a dragon. There would still be nosy people poking and prying around the court, perhaps even other reporters than Skeeter. He did not want them carrying back stories about the Boy Who Accused Fudge looking pale or worn or tired.

"You weren't in your bed, Potter," was Millicent's greeting as he slid into place at the Slytherin table. She had two full plates in front of her, and she pushed one of them towards Harry. "Eat, and then we can talk."

Harry frowned at her. "You could stop treating me as a child, you know," he said, and started to eat.

"When you stop acting like one, then I will," said Millicent. She glanced about, but their part of the table was largely empty; Pansy always slept in on a Sunday, and Blaise and Vince had already finished and gone. Merlin knew where. Draco was in the library researching empathy, Harry knew. Millicent leaned nearer to Harry and lowered her voice. "You should stop that, you know. Other people are starting to notice."

Harry swallowed around a lump that seemed to have frozen in his throat. Another problem. Another damn problem. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Other people are noticing that someone has to coax you to eat, to sleep." Millicent took a dainty bite, her eyes never leaving his. "And what they notice, their parents notice, at least some of them. You can't afford to look weak, Potter, and neither can your allies. You should start shaping up soon. Any victories you gain are worthless when you can't be depended upon to stay on your feet past them, or if you have to spend days in the hospital wing recovering from them." She raised her eyebrows, the expression she usually had before going in for the kill. "Plus, it doesn't give most people much trust in your basic common sense."

Harry frowned and chewed as he considered that. It was true that he didn't want to inflict public damage on his allies for allying with him. On the other hand, how could he stop? Some of the victories that he won for others were dependent on the time that he spent away from extensive meals and bed rest.

"I could improve the magic that I'm using to prevent people from noticing," he offered. "I found some spells that—"

"Not enough, Harry." Millicent's voice had gone quiet and intense. "That would only solve half the problems. If you're driving yourself into the ground, you'll start making mistakes. More, your magic will be more likely to go mad, and that's what we depend on to win us victories in the first place."

Harry picked at his food, no longer hungry. Millicent, though, leaned closer and closer, until her stern look filled all his vision. It promised wrath, probably a public scene, if he didn't finish his breakfast. Harry sighed and started eating again.

"I don't know what to do," Harry admitted at last, after several minutes of eating and thinking.

"I do." Millicent was smug, but at the moment, Harry couldn't hold it against her. "Delegate, Potter, for Merlin's sake. Get other people to

help you. Don't try to do everything yourself. It's what the best leaders have always done."

Harry resisted the temptation to say he wasn't a leader. Millicent would ignore him, anyway. "But most of the tasks I have are ones that only I can do," he argued. "Either because of strength of magic, or because they're serving people who will only trust me."

"Name one." Millicent folded her hands on the table and watched him with a quietude that didn't fool Harry for a moment. It was the look she wore right before she proved someone wrong in class.

"My duties as vates, for instance," Harry muttered. "Most of the magical creatures won't see or converse with anyone but me."

The Many on his arm stirred, and thrust its head from his sleeve. "What is for breakfast?" it hissed.

"Meat," said Harry, and fed it, then added to Millicent, "You see? Most wizards aren't Parselmouths."

"So my speaking to cobras and Runespoors for you is out." Millicent waved her hand. "You must have some allies who speak English, Potter."

"The centaurs, but—"

"And they'll accept a delegate if you appoint one according to the proper formalities." Millicent rolled her eyes. "Merlin, but you're stupid sometimes, Potter. All you need to do is send me to them with a token of your first meeting. I would think you knew that."

Harry winced. "I didn't think of it," he said quietly.

"And that's the problem, Potter, your not thinking. It's going to ruin you if you let it." Millicent shook her head at him. "I think you'll find many more willing hands than you think you will, if you only ask. Most people our age would be thrilled and excited to help in duties this big. Gryffindors will like the secrecy of it all, and the purebloods in other

Houses will like the ceremoniousness. And those of us who are formally allied with you will feel like we're doing something to help."

Harry nodded slowly. "Then I'll find you an egg-shaped stone. That was the token I shattered to save Draco's life when I first met the centaurs."

"Save his—" Millicent halted and shook her head. "Never mind. I don't think I want all the details of the strange relationship that you two have."

She paused and watched Harry as if waiting for his response to that, but Harry just looked back in mild puzzlement. "I don't blame you," he said at last. "I would imagine that details of friendships are boring to most people not directly involved in them."

Millicent growled something about blindness and oblivious idiots, hit the table with her hand, and then said, "I'd be glad to do something to help you. And so would Pansy, and so would Blaise. And Draco—you've got to see that he would work himself to the bone for you, Harry. I can't believe you haven't taken advantage of this fact before now."

"You all have your own lives."

"And they're part of yours. For Merlin's sake," said Millicent yet again, but she sounded less displeased this time. "Well, unless you have somewhere to go today, then—"

"I'm going to the Ministry to witness Fudge's no confidence vote," said Harry, and began eating in earnest. Despite the few hours that he had before he had to meet Dumbledore, he still wanted to use the time as best he could. The unexpected chunk missing out of his day was going to play merry havoc with his plans. "Apparently, it's a formality that everyone involved in the motion has to be there to witness it."

"Yes, there is one of those," said Millicent, and lightly caught his wrist. "Harry," she said, and sat there until he looked at her. "If you get in trouble at the Ministry, go to the Department of Magical Games and

Sports. I have an uncle who works there, Thor Bulstrode. You can depend on him in times of trouble.”

“I’m just going to witness a trial,” said Harry, caught off guard by the intense look Millicent was giving him.

“This is politics, Harry.” Millicent smiled faintly, but her eyes didn’t relent. “Nothing is ever just one thing.”

Harry nodded his consent and his understanding, and Millicent released his wrist and turned back to her own breakfast. Harry went on eating, more slowly this time, because his mind was plunging around, reordering its conception of the world. Sometimes he forgot, since he lived in Hogwarts most of the year and so many of the things central to his own existence happened here, that his alliances implicated him in a larger world beyond it.

I should remember that more often, he thought, and wrote it on a mental scroll, and slid it into place alongside thirty thousand other duties in his library.

The courtroom where the Wizengamot met could have passed easily for a dungeon room in Hogwarts, Harry thought. It was gloomy enough, with bare, blank stone walls lit by torches in sconces that looked subtly wrong to Harry, though that might only be the spells wrapping them to keep the torches alight. In the center of the room was a chair wrapped with chains. The judges’ balcony loomed above that, and Harry could see most Wizengamot members already there. Pointed hats nodded to each other as they milled between their seats.

“Come, Harry.”

Harry shook his head and followed Dumbledore across the judges’ balcony. He would sit in the center, Harry saw, and there was a small chair positioned directly behind him, where Harry could sit. Even more tension ran out of his muscles at the sight. No one would observe him at all. On the other hand, he could see easily between the members of the court, and if he craned his neck or used a mild Seeing Spell, he could see over the balcony and to Fudge’s chair as well.

“Hem, hem.”

Harry turned his head, and met Umbridge’s eyes.

The witch stood looking at him. She did not smile, and she did not toy with the small pink bows of the cardigan she wore beneath her robes, which only made her look more menacing. Harry supposed she intended to engage him in a staring contest, but he turned his back on her before that could happen, and took the seat that Dumbledore had provided for him.

He did not want to look at her. She reminded him of the pain he had caused, and the foul things hiding inside him. He cast the Seeing Spell that turned a small patch of air in front of him into a window instead, and let him see through solid stone to where Fudge was shuffling into place. He cupped his palm around the window so that no one else could see it.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry felt himself tense, but didn’t look up. “Yes, Madam Umbridge?”

“Such a polite boy,” she said in that kittenish, little girl’s voice. “A piece of advice, sweet child. If today does not work out as you hope, you should still watch your back, rather than your hands.”

“I have eyes in many different directions, Madam Umbridge,” Harry murmured. “That shouldn’t be difficult.”

He felt her pause, as if she were going to add some other dire warning, but then she shook her head and shuffled off to her seat. Harry shuddered. He could only imagine that she was one of Fudge’s appointees to the Wizengamot, and of course she would vote to retain him. He had to hope that most of the other wizards and witches would follow Dumbledore’s lead.

“Mr. Potter.”

This was another witch’s voice, but Harry did not recognize it, and took the chance of looking up. In front of him stood an incredibly old

woman, her face so mapped by wrinkles that Harry couldn't see any smooth skin. The soft blaze of her magic told him that she wasn't that powerful, but incredibly well-controlled. She was probably older than Dumbledore.

He clenched a hand in front of his heart and bowed, as the young were supposed to do to elders they respected. A wistful smile caused some of the witch's wrinkles to realign.

"I haven't seen that gesture in decades," she murmured. "No one is as polite any more as they are supposed to be." She extended a small, graceful hand, which Harry gently grasped. "My name is Griselda Marchbanks, Mr. Potter. I suspect we have some friends in common."

Harry nodded a bit. He'd heard of this woman, who had sat on the Wizengamot for years. "Headmaster Dumbledore, Madam?"

"Not just him," said Griselda, and leaned closer to him. "Some of them very much shorter than Albus Dumbledore."

Harry blinked, and abruptly remembered something else about Griselda that he'd heard but forgotten: she supposedly had links with goblin groups who at one time had plotted rebellion against the wizards. He swallowed. "You are involved in vates business, too, Madam?" he asked, and lowered his voice as he did so.

Griselda winked gravely at him. "Never had the power for that path, myself," she said. "But suffice it to say that I know quite a bit about it, and when seagulls and starlings both are flying back and forth in excitement, I know that someone special has given us what we wanted all along. A chance."

Seagulls would be from the northern goblins, Harry surmised. He supposed the southern ones must use starlings as messengers. "I would like to speak with you later, Madam, if there's time."

"So polite," Griselda said, in an uncanny echo of Umbridge, and nodded to him, and went to claim her seat. Harry watched her go.

I suppose, if I can have enemies I didn't know about, I can have allies that way, too.

"Take your places, please! Take your places, please!"

That was a wizard bearing the old, heavy medallion of a court scribe, whom Harry already didn't like, if only for his officious manner. He settled back in his seat, though, and directed his attention to his window. Fudge sat in the chain-draped chair, his gaze traveling over the members of the Wizengamot. His face flickered continually with changing emotions, hope and despair and disgust and grief and uncertainty. Harry shook his head. Has he never learned to hide what he's thinking?

"The Wizengamot has gathered to cast a vote of no confidence on Minister Cornelius Fudge," said the scribe, reading from a large and official-looking scroll. "Amelia Bones has called the motion. Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore presiding."

"Thank you, Edgar," said Dumbledore, and stood. Harry saw the way that eyes turned towards him as he moved. A barely detectable shimmer of power insured that. Harry shook his head. I can only hope to have that much control over my magic someday. "First, according to the Wizengamot's Charter, the accused has a right to representation. Have you chosen to waive that right, Cornelius, or would you like to call someone in now?"

"I am not the accused," said Fudge, his body trembling as he leaned forward in the chair. "This is a vote of confidence or no confidence only. I'll only lose my job if I lose this, not my freedom or my life."

Dumbledore beamed at him, from the sound of his voice. "Silly of me," he murmured. "Forgive me. I do get confused." A titter moved through the members of the Wizengamot at that. "All right, then, Cornelius. I trust you know why this motion has been brought against you."

"I know the more ridiculous accusations," said Fudge. "I want to hear them all, and I want to hear them now."

“As you wish,” said Dumbledore, and nodded to a gray-haired witch with a monocle and a sharp jaw sitting a few seats down from him. Harry turned to face her, and decided this must be Amelia Bones. She certainly looked strong enough for it. She rose to her feet with a scroll in her arms and a grim expression on her face.

“Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge,” she read out. “You are accused of the following crimes:

“Of forming a secret police force on your own cognizance, called the Hounds, which included ex-Aurors who had been sacked for incompetence or negligence of their duties, thus increasing the danger to the public safety.

“Of executing three persons without trial, thereby violating the rule of law.

“Of arresting at least one person with these Hounds, thus appointing yourself arbiter of right and wrong in a way that the Minister’s office was never intended to be.

“Of abducting a fourteen-year-old wizard called Harry Potter and bringing him to the Ministry without his guardian, thereby putting a child in danger and in legal trouble that he was not legally competent to handle by himself.

“Of using a magical artifact to try and drain Harry Potter’s magic, thus employing a punishment that has been historically used on only the most dangerous and desperate criminals.

“Of claiming the privileges of a Minister in a time of war when no war has been declared, thereby flouting the Wizengamot’s authority.

“Of passing edicts against Dark wizards and Dark magical talents without putting these edicts through due process of law, thus flouting the Wizengamot’s authority once more.”

There were more accusations, but Harry didn’t think he had to listen to them. He sat back, shaking his head, and saw Fudge sink lower

and lower in his chair as each accusation was repeated. Madam Bones's steady, clear voice never faltered.

Harry started sneaking looks at the members of the Wizengamot, trying to decide how they would vote. A few faces were closed, and he could tell nothing from them. Most, however, looked steadily more disgusted as the list rolled on. They might not care anything about him, Harry thought, or even about the people that Fudge had illegally arrested and killed, but they were part of the governing body that Fudge had ignored in making his mad schemes. They had no chance of retaining true power if they left the Minister's office in Fudge's hands, and they must know it now. Harry relaxed as the list of accusations finally came to a conclusion, and Madam Bones leaned forward and peered at Fudge as if he were an interesting species of bug.

"Do you have anything to add to this list?" she asked. "Any accusations that you see fit to deny?"

Harry glanced back at the window cradled in the palm of his hand again. Fudge had a mulish look on his face.

"All I did," he said, "I did for the good of wizarding Britain. Besides, most of those accusations were made by people who had no personal interest in them, weren't they? I've never been approached about illegal executions. It was my political enemies who decided I acted wrongly."

He held his hands out in front of him and looked from face to face. "Most of you know me," he said. "I'm a good wizard of good family, Light-declared, who's always done my best for our world. Who opposes me? Paper-chasers, who don't even dare to show their faces in court. There's no one here with a legitimate grievance against me, no one who dares to meet me face to face, flesh to blood. This is all made in passive voice, from an impersonal distance. Oh, yes, very easy to do, isn't it, when you can't look the man you're accusing in the eye? But not one person who actually wants to act as eyewitness to any of these supposed crimes."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel his heart beating in his chest, slow and heavy. No one had looked at him yet, except Griselda. No one had even noticed that he was here, seemingly. His own power was shielded by Dumbledore's, and his chair was in a secure and sheltered place. He had no need to rise to his feet and confront Fudge. He was going to lose anyway. This was too little, too late. Harry didn't have to answer Fudge's bluster.

"You're wrong," said another calm, clear voice, which did not belong to Madam Bones. "There is one wizard here who did dare to come and face you, and he's the youngest of your victims."

Harry opened his eyes, turned his head, and met Scrimgeour's gaze. He sat behind Madam Bones's chair, his bad leg propped out in front of him, his eyes steady and without mercy.

Rufus had become aware of young Harry almost at once. He'd been around Dumbledore too many times not to notice what seemed an addition or augmentation to his power. In fighting the compulsion to pay attention to the old wizard, even when Amelia was reading out the accusations, he'd turned his face in the right direction and seen Harry, half-in and half-out of the shadows.

And he'd known why Dumbledore would have brought him, and he knew what a chance he had, especially when Fudge made that idiotic plea for one of his accusers to rise and confront him.

Rufus did feel a pang of sympathy for the boy, whose green eyes were saying, all too clearly, that he did not want to take this chance, that he would not even dignify Fudge with a response if he had the choice.

But Harry did not yet understand the way Ministry politics worked, not completely. Fudge could be ripped out, but he would leave roots behind, most especially that odious Umbridge. Rufus did not want him to leave behind any roots of respect, though. It would be better if Fudge's last moments in front of the Wizengamot were utterly tarnished, if there was no lingering doubt in the Elders' minds that they had done the best thing.

And Dumbledore seemed all too content to keep the boy hidden, not displaying him the way that Rufus would have thought he would, if he wanted to show the world that Harry was under his control. Whatever Dumbledore wanted was something that Rufus Scrimgeour usually wanted to oppose.

Rise, Harry, Rufus said silently in his own mind. I think that we may have left it alone too long already. There are some here to whom you will be a surprise, and that is not the way it should be.

Harry swallowed and stood. He felt gazes moving towards him, necks craned awkwardly and chairs turned around, and Scrimgeour suggested calmly, "Perhaps young Potter should move to the center of the court, so that all involved can see him?"

Harry shuddered as he imagined those eyes crawling like spiders down his shirt, but he inclined his head and made his way off the judges' balcony, until he could stand on the floor of the courtroom. He ignored Fudge's gaping mouth. He felt compelled to back up until he was at least not hurting his own neck, meeting the eyes of the Wizengamot members.

"Now, Cornelius," said Madam Bones, in a faintly amused voice, "you were saying something about none of your accusers facing you? And what did you want to say to Mr. Potter?"

Harry glanced at Fudge from the corner of his eye. The Minister's face had gone white, though, and it was only too obvious that he didn't have anything planned for this eventuality. His mouth was flopping open and then shut again, as if he were a fox caught in a trap.

"Mr. Potter," said Madam Bones then. "Do you have anything to say to Minister Fudge?"

The stares intensified. Harry could gladly have shucked his own skin, as bad, as unnatural, as it felt, to have all these people paying attention to him.

He carefully pushed his discomfort under the surface of a pool of quicksilver, the way Snape had taught him. He had a chance to do some good here, something that mattered to more people than just himself alone. Perhaps he should thank Scrimgeour for the opportunity after all, though at the moment he wasn't particularly inclined to.

He turned and faced the Minister. Fudge was looking at him as if faintly curious what he might say. Harry fixed his gaze and his awareness only on him. It was easier that way than if he tried to imagine everyone else staring at him. Merlin, his breath was coming fast, and if he—

Harry chopped off the thoughts, not letting them continue. He met Fudge's eyes, and began.

"I always thought of the Minister as someone who served the public interest, sir," he said quietly. He knew that the courtroom's acoustics, and carefully placed spells, would repeat his words in the ears of everyone in attendance, though. "I suppose I didn't think much about that. It was just the sort of thing I learned as a child, the way that other children learned things.

"I began to question the Ministry's actions last year, when I realized they had passed legal restrictions against werewolves. I've had a very dear friend in a werewolf, Remus Lupin, and he had been taking the Wolfsbane Potion for the last year. It worked. There's finally a potion that could give werewolves hope, and then they had it taken away, because the Ministry forbade them to have custody of a child, to hold a paying job, to borrow money. They were about to become productive members of society, and now they're going to be more desperate than ever.

"I suppose that's when a lot of my romantic illusions about the Ministry shattered, assuming that I had any left. I no longer thought that they worked for the good of wizarding Britain. I thought they worked for the good of part of wizarding Britain, and only that."

Harry paused. His breath was still coming fast, if he let it; his body was not convinced by his mind's insistence that only one person was

watching him, and neither was the training he had received from Lily. The impulse to flee from the room was fading, though. He could do this. He could go through with this.

“And then I had that confirmed this summer, when you kidnapped me,” he finished. “I knew that even children weren’t safe. I thought no one in the Ministry would ever take me to an illegal trial, ever take me somewhere without my guardian’s consent, ever try to drain my magic. But you did, and—“

“I did not!” Fudge interrupted harshly.

“I can fetch a Pensieve, Minister, if you would like,” said Madam Bones, all concerned helpfulness.

Harry felt his body stiffen. No. They would all see him hurting Umbridge if they did that, and Harry did not want to remember what he had done. Sick shame was already bubbling in his gut like vomit.

But Fudge, luckily, shrank from the offer. “No,” he said. “No. I only meant—I meant that there were extenuating circumstances that the child does not understand.” He gave Harry a sickly sweet smile, which Harry returned with a level glance.

“Do explain them, Minister,” said Madam Bones. “This is a very serious matter, and though of course this is a motion for a vote of no confidence and not a trial to put you in Azkaban, we would like to understand everything that surrounds it. Every extenuating circumstance, every unusual occurrence, should be explained in full.”

Fudge went pale again. “I do not wish to speak,” he said, and tried to put his head up and strive for a look of dignity.

Madam Bones waited, then said, “Did you have anything else to say, Mr. Potter?”

Harry shook his head. I know that Scrimgeour probably wants me to do something more, but I don’t know what it is, and I don’t want to stand here. “Just that that day irreparably broke my trust in the Minister,” he said. “I think I could trust again, but only if justice is truly

served this day.” He gave a little bow to signify that that was the end of it.

“Very well, Mr. Potter,” said Madam Bones. “Please return to your seat.”

Harry climbed the stairs again, and resumed his tiny chair. The Wizengamot was stirring and murmuring, most of the wizards and witches turning at least once to look at him, and then looking away again. Harry ducked his head, and felt his cheeks turning steadily and steadily more crimson, his heart hammering loud enough, finally, to obscure the murmurs.

Did Scrimgeour even accomplish what he wanted to accomplish with that? I hope so. I’m certainly not doing it again.

Rufus watched with a faint smile as Harry took his seat, and shook his head. The boy didn’t seem to realize what he’d done, even by speaking his short little piece that emphasized werewolf rights at the expense of his own. He was still young, at least in looks, and he had had the courage to face the Minister, and Fudge hadn’t been able to answer him in any way. The Minister’s last moments were forever tarnished now, and he was a weakling, and Rufus no longer had any doubt that the Wizengamot would cast a vote of no confidence to throw Fudge out of office.

And, more to the point, the boy’s magic had poured off him like heat off a phoenix, once he was away from Dumbledore’s shielding influence.

Things were changing even as Rufus watched, small currents of thought traveling through the Elders’ minds. Harry realigned the world just by walking around, and he’d done it again here. Rufus would be content with that. The world should change, with the advent of a new Minister.

And it’s about to change even further. Amelia had told him—well, told many people—of her own plan. Rufus hadn’t told anyone of his.

He watched calmly as Amelia called for the vote. Three members of the Wizengamot voted to retain Fudge as Minister. Two abstained. Three weren't there.

That still left forty-three witches and wizards who voted that they had no confidence left in Cornelius Fudge, and cast him, resoundingly, out of office. Amelia cast her vote with a small smile, Dumbledore with a calm voice and a glance darted at Rufus as the voting moved on around the circle.

Rufus met his eyes. Oh, yes, scowl at me, Light Lord, if you must. I'm taking the Ministry back, and in a moment, you'll see how.

Amelia clapped her hands, and two of Rufus's Aurors came to escort a dazed Fudge back to his own office—or the room that had been his office until just a few moments ago. "Now," said Amelia. "I realize that an event of great moment has just taken place, but we must not leave our poor island in the lurch for long. I call for an emergency election for Minister to take place, no later than the first day of January. In the meantime, the Wizengamot will govern Britain. Is there anyone who wishes to say nay?"

There was a deafening silence. Fudge's supporters, Rufus saw, including that horrible Umbridge woman, scowled, but remained silent.

Amelia nodded. "All the rules for emergency elections apply. Candidates for Minister may offer themselves at any point before the New Year. They may campaign with all tactics that are legal in a more usual race for office. I would like to announce my own candidacy at this time."

There were a few surprised noises, but not many. Amelia really had been cultivating the ground. Rufus nodded, and waited.

Amelia looked around with a faintly bored expression. "Would anyone else like to announce themselves as candidates now?"

Rufus gave a little cough and stood. He felt surprised eyes swing his way—and Dumbledore's, at least, were dismayed. He liked that.

"I would," he said off-handedly.

Harry blinked, then shook his head. Oh. That was why he called on me, then. This had something to do with preparing his own campaign for Minister. Maybe he wanted to make absolutely sure that Fudge would be defeated.

Harry shrugged, and put it out of his head. His own part was done now, except for the meeting with Griselda. He stood, looking for the old witch in the sudden movement of people, but found Dumbledore in front of him.

"Harry," said the older wizard with extreme firmness. "I really think that we should be returning to school."

Harry sighed and nodded, reluctantly. He was unwilling to make a scene now, not when people were still glancing at him, and he didn't want Dumbledore to know that he was interested in an alliance with someone who had links to goblin groups. I can always owl her.

"Just a moment, Albus," said Griselda's voice just then. "I wanted to congratulate Mr. Potter. That was a fine piece of oratory that you did there, young man." She held out her hand, as if for the first time, and Harry shook it. "Have you ever considered a career in politics?"

Harry met her sparkling eyes, and did his best to smile. "Not really, Madam," he said. "I keep busy."

"I'm sure that you must," she murmured. "But politics isn't incompatible with a busy life, you know. In fact, it's the cause of busy lives in other people."

Harry could feel his own smile turning more natural. "I'm sure, Madam," he said. "But I prefer to work with people, and not just the framework of the Ministry. No matter who the people are," he added, hoping she would interpret that the way he meant it. Goblins are people, too.

"Ah. A distaste for bureaucracy. Well, sometimes that produces admirable bureaucrats. But someone who can get his way through

other means might not need that.” Griselda’s eyes shifted as if to look at something in the air around him.

My magic. Harry decided that Millicent was right, and his exhaustion must be affecting the way he controlled his power. He really wanted the damn stuff confined to his body. More than that, though, he wanted to stop Griselda before she could wander onto paths he wouldn’t walk.

“Not at all, Madam,” he said. “I prefer to work with people. Not against them, not above them, but with them.”

Griselda’s face softened. “I understand that impulse, Mr. Potter,” she said quietly. “It led me into the Ministry. Perhaps your inclinations will take you down the same path, or a different one, but no less valuable.”

“I hope so, Madam.”

Dumbledore insisted on hustling him away then, and Harry didn’t get a chance to say anything more. He lifted his head, gave a shuddering breath, and forced himself to consider this a victory.

We got Fudge out of office. We did it. And whether Scrimgeour or Madam Bones becomes our next Minister, as I can hope one of them will, he or she will be a better Minister than Fudge ever dreamed of.

I’ll have to tell Draco that I nearly panicked in front of the Wizengamot, though. How in the world am I ever going to be a leader at this rate? It really would be better for me to work from the shadows, or from within the Forest. That gets just as much accomplished without all this staring, and then I won’t fail anyone.

At least that didn’t take as long as I thought it would. Now, I can get more things done this afternoon.

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Last Day Before

“Who’s that from?”

Draco was quick, and curious, and leaned across Harry’s shoulder as though he would snatch a sight of the name written on the outside of the envelope. Harry was quicker, though, and managed to cover the envelope with one hand.

Not that it would have told Draco anything anyway, Harry realized as he looked down, ignoring the dull twinge that seemed to pull to the left side of his chest. There was only his own name, Harry, written in a delicate hand. The difference was that he knew that hand, and he already knew he would have to read the letter alone.

“Well, who’s it from?” Draco demanded again.

Harry shook his head again, and slid the envelope into a pocket of his robe. “No one,” he said.

“It can’t be no one,” said Draco, and peered into his face. Harry could feel a distant tug on his mind that he suspected was Draco’s empathy working, trying to coax the truth out of him. “Nobodies don’t write on parchment, and nobodies don’t put your name on envelopes.” He lowered his voice, though Harry could feel most of the Slytherin table watching them already. “Nobodies don’t make you look as though you’ve received a blow to the solar plexus.”

Harry swallowed. He knew he couldn’t tell Draco the truth. Draco would demand to know what Harry thought he was doing, and even if Harry explained, he wouldn’t understand most of it, not really. “Draco,” he whispered. “Please. I’ve yielded other things to you, the contents of my nightmares and the contents of my emotions, without complaining. Leave me this.”

“I could do that a lot more easily if you didn’t look the way you look.” Draco’s irritated flush had faded, and now his face was pale. “Harry, I think you should tell me. Not because I want to know, but for your own sake.”

“It’s important to me,” whispered Harry. “It’s something I really need privacy on.”

Draco let out a long breath in which Harry could hear many emotions, including the irritation that he’d obviously tried to dismiss. Then he put one hand over Harry’s wrist and squeezed.

“When you’re ready to talk, come to me,” said Draco. “Don’t—I don’t know, don’t go and blab everything to your brother, not if he wouldn’t understand either. I want to know.”

Harry met his eyes, gauging his willingness to know. Draco did seem sincere. He nodded, once.

Draco smiled at him, though the expression was strained, and withdrew his hand. “Pass the pancakes this way, Blaise,” he said, waving a lazy hand at the platter still sitting in front of the other boy. “I’m not minded to wait while you fill your pockets with them. Thinking of feeding them to your little lion, later?”

Blaise flushed and almost hurled the platter down the table. “At least I have the courage to talk to my crush,” he said spitefully.

Draco drew his wand under the table, and muttered a quick spell that Harry couldn’t hear properly. A moment later, Blaise’s hair turned pink. He didn’t notice, at least until the snickering sped up and down the table. Draco slid his wand back into his sleeve, looking pleased with himself.

Harry shook his head, but couldn’t bring himself to scold. Not when he was sure that his voice wouldn’t shake when he spoke. Not when Draco watched him from the corner of his eye as if he might collapse at any second.

He forced his own breathing calm, and accepted the pancake platter as Draco slid it to him in turn. His stomach churned unpleasantly, but he did have to eat. Apart from classes and the letter to answer later, this was the last Friday in November. That made it the last day before the First Task.

He had to help Connor find a way to defeat the dragons, and soon. “I don’t know,” Connor whinged, tossing aside *Dragons and Their Origins*. “I think that Viktor and Fleur must have all the good books out. There’s nothing in here.”

Harry glanced up from a book of glamours he’d been studying. “I told you what I think you should use.”

“And I told you why it wouldn’t work.” Connor was obviously trying hard to be patient. He flinched when Madam Pince glared at them over her glasses, and lowered his voice. They were, technically, not supposed to be in the library, since they were both skiving off classes. “I can wrap myself in a glamour to discourage scent and sound and sight, but we haven’t found any glamours to disguise the vibrations of my footsteps on the ground. And you were the one who told me that dragons were closely related to snakes. They would feel me coming.”

Harry chewed his lip and flipped through the book again. That was true, but Harry couldn’t shake the—perhaps foolish—hope that glamours were their best bet. He’d got much useful information out of this book, particularly a scent-defeating glamour that he had wrapped around himself now, just in case Hawthorn came by. And it wasn’t as though Connor had any other ideas. He wasn’t good enough at Transfiguration or Charms to use the defenses against the dragons that Harry had first hit upon, and suspected the other Champions would be using.

Harry flipped another page, and found that he’d come to the end of the book’s section on glamours. He sat up when he saw the title of the next one: *Illusions*.

“Connor,” he whispered.

“What?” Connor glanced up from using his wand to scratch at the table, obviously working hard to look bored instead of terrified out of his mind.

“What about casting illusions to fool the dragon?” Harry asked. “And wrapping the glamours around them? They wouldn’t have the

vibrations of your footsteps, that's true, but I think they might be distracted enough by all the different scents and sights to not realize that none of them were you. And you could, if you really tried, make illusions solid enough that they might cause vibrations."

Connor brightened for a moment, then let his face fall. "Wouldn't work," he said. "It would still have to be a lot of illusions, to keep me safe from the dragon's flame. And I can't control that many."

Then he went still, his eyes shining but an odd expression around his mouth, and Harry felt a surge of hope.

"What?" he asked.

"I—I forgot," Connor whispered. "I've tried so hard to forget everything about the end of last year." He glanced at Harry. Harry met his twin's eyes. He understood perfectly why Connor would want to forget the end of last year. His brother was the only one who would ever know that as well as he did.

"Go on," he said.

"Towards the end, Voldemort was teaching me to use my compulsion gift on my own spells," said Connor quietly. "It's not that they have minds, exactly, but spells that look like humans can—fool the compulsion, sometimes. The compulsion reaches out and controls them the way that it would try to control a mind, or a wizard who's more powerful and well-trained than I am would control many spells at once. The way Hermione does, maybe." Connor grinned for a moment. "Wonder what she'd say if I told her that she has a gift like compulsion."

Then his grin vanished, and he looked hard at Harry. "If I could just cast the illusions and the glamours, then I could use compulsion to control them, make them obey my wishes. I could send them in the directions I wanted. It'd still be risky, because the dragon might flame at me, after all, and I'd have to cast the other spells all at once, in a very short time. But I might be able to manage it."

“Do you know the incantation for a mirror image of yourself?” Harry asked.

Connor nodded. “Dupliciter. Siri—Voldemort taught me that one when he was practicing with me.” Connor looked somewhat ill, as he did whenever he remembered that he’d been taking lessons with the Dark Lord himself. “I can do that easily enough. And then the glamours—wrapping them around the illusions will be the hard part. I’m more practiced with the illusions and the compulsion than I am with them.”

“Then let’s practice, shall we?” Harry asked, standing and picking up an armful of books to take them back to the shelves.

Connor looked at him with a faint, horrified admiration. “What? And miss lunch, too?”

Harry snorted. “You know as well as I where the kitchens are.” The only difference there was that Harry had learned it from the house elves, in his first, tentative talks with them, and Connor had learned it from the Weasley twins. “We can eat later. But, Merlin, Connor. I want you to survive this.”

Connor grinned slightly as he stood. “Me, too,” he said. “That would be nice.”

Harry hugged him briefly, ignoring Madam Pince’s tutting. “I won’t let you die, whatever happens,” he whispered. “But I do want you to be able to succeed on your own if it’s at all possible. I know that you didn’t choose this, but—“

“No, I’ve become reconciled to it, a bit.” Connor’s voice was resigned. “No one else’s name is coming out of the Goblet, and I’ve got to do the best I can. The honor of Hogwarts, and all.”

Harry’s heart clenched at the words. He wanted to spend more time with his brother, to demand the names of the people who’d hurt him, to hug him again and reassure him it would be all right.

He could only say, "Let's find one of the abandoned classrooms to practice the spells in."

"Dupliciter!"

Harry held his breath as his brother's image multiplied, then doubled again and again and again. He was good with the illusions, Harry acknowledged. Voldemort had apparently been an exacting taskmaster, trying all the time to draw Connor further under his influence.

Harry shook away the dark memories. He was fine. He was past them now. They were gone, and he had to concentrate on helping his brother survive the dragons.

"Dissimulo aspectum, dissimulo sonitum, dissimulo odoratum—"

Harry shook his head as he watched the spells falter again. Connor was concentrating, his face bright red as he chanted, casting the spells as fast as he could, but it was no use. They only wrapped one illusion at a time, and meanwhile the illusions were fading as Connor lost control of them before he could reach out with his compulsion. And those were only the weak glamours, the ones they'd decided to try to see how fast and hard Connor could cast. They weren't of the strength it would take to fool a dragon.

Harry wasn't quite ready to give up on the plan yet, though. His mouth tasted of ashes when he thought about the fact that the First Task was tomorrow, and there was no more time. He had to do something, so he would.

"Connor," he said, as the last of the illusions faded and Connor glanced at him in exhaustion. He flicked sweat from his brow, flipping up his fringe and bringing his scar into view. Harry felt his own twinge as if in sympathy. "This isn't working."

"But it has to," Connor insisted, sitting down on one of the crooked, broken desks in the corner. He traced patterns in the dust with a finger, not looking at Harry. "We don't have time to try anything else."

Harry shook his head. "I wasn't entirely talking about that," he said. "What we need is a spell that combines illusions and glamours, one that you can cast just a few times, so you can start controlling your illusions with your compulsion."

Connor sighed. "I don't know any spells like that." Abruptly, he slammed his hand down on his desk, not even seeming to notice when he scraped his fist open. "Shit! If I was just stronger, I wouldn't have any problem casting this many spells at once or making the illusions more solid, and then everything would be fine."

Harry winced. There weren't many times when he felt actively guilty for having stronger magic than most people did, but this was one of them. He pitched his voice low and soothing as he moved towards Connor. "Off the top of my head, I don't know one that includes the scent glamour in an illusion, even if it does include sound and sight. It's not all right, I know. But I want to try something."

Connor sighed again, the anger burnt out as quickly as it had flared. "You might as well, Harry. Nothing is impossible for you."

Harry chose to ignore the jealousy in his voice. He closed his eyes and sank into the depths of his memory, where book pages flipped past at speed. There was the one that would let him cast a solid illusion, a spell that he'd used more than once, when he wanted to leave a copy of himself in bed or at a meal and fool Draco and Snape into thinking he was there. It was limited, since the illusion would only say a few phrases and fade out of existence in a short time, but he thought a variation of it, the way he'd learned to vary the Flame Mirror spell, might serve.

"Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu," he said.

The words rippled oddly in his mouth, and for a moment, Harry thought it wasn't going to work, or that his wandless magic, which he'd confined strictly to his body for the past days, was about to break out and crash into and bounce off things. But then he heard Connor breathe something like, "To the life," and Harry opened his eyes and saw a copy of himself standing before him.

He took a step forward, and a cautious sniff. He grinned when he caught a scent of sweat. That wasn't everything he smelled like, but then, the dragon would hardly be familiar with Connor's ordinary scent, either.

"What about vibrations?" his brother asked, hazel eyes alight. "Could we do that?"

Harry nodded, and turned to an empty patch of space. "Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare!"

Another copy of himself appeared, smelling of sweat. Harry focused on it, asking it silently to walk forward, and it did, shuffling along. He could clearly feel the shifts of the feet and the trembling in the floor.

Harry chuckled and dismissed the image, then looked at Connor. "You won't want one that steps that heavily, I know," he said. "But the spell is going to be useful anyway."

"You're damn right it is." Connor's face was alive again, eyes all but glowing. He stood and drew his wand. "How did the spell go again? Aede—"

"Aedi," Harry corrected, and set about teaching his brother the correct pronunciation. Connor was managing weak efforts in a few minutes, driven by the same strength and energy he put into Quidditch. Harry felt his tension dissolve into a rush of joy as he watched him. He was going to survive this after all. Harry was not going to lose his brother. There was a possible failure that he was not going to have to bear.

And watching someone else happy made him happy. Thus he passed the most enjoyable part of his afternoon.

Other things were—not so enjoyable.

Harry leaned his back against the Owlery wall and opened his letter. He knew that he was going to get into trouble. McGonagall never took kindly to anyone missing Transfiguration, sick or not, late or not, and Harry had missed all his classes that day. He'd used a Disillusionment Charm to escape several confrontations with irate Slytherins. He was sorry. He was sorry for all of it. But he simply

could not stand to have anyone around him when he looked at the letter inside that envelope that had come this morning.

Dear my son:

I was grateful to receive your letter, and to know what you thought about what had happened between us. I must admit, I didn't expect that interpretation. I didn't realize that I'd trained you so well, or that you had thought about issues like this so long and so thoroughly.

I think, Harry, that if you look at the difference between your allies and myself, you'll find that what separates us is motive. Your allies did what they did for a belief in pureblood superiority that you know is utterly untrue. Or they did it because they were afraid of the fanatical madman they had chosen to follow. Then they tried to escape the consequences of their choices by claiming they'd been under the Imperius Curse. I know the Ministry won't touch them now, so you need have no fear of my using your letter against them. But they never really repented. They simply took advantage of a loophole in the laws.

Whereas I—I have faced my crimes, and paid for them.

Doesn't there come an end, Harry, a point at which one must cease to take vengeance or exact justice? You seem to have reached it with your allies, or would have demanded an answer from them long since. I wish you could reach it with me. I have lost my magic. I have admitted that I would have raised you differently had I known what your power truly meant. I have read your words saying that I have possibly saved the world by making you what you are.

When does the point come at which the bitterness and hatred cease to exist? I am tired of hatred, Harry, and tired of being afraid. I admit that I hated you in the first moments after you took my magic, but now it's gone, and Dumbledore has made sure that I have everything I need. Now I'm simply weary. I want my boys home again. I want to hold my husband in my arms. I want to know that one of our oldest friends in the world is at least alive, even if he has no intention of

seeing us again. It's too late for Sirius. It's not too late for the rest of us, unless one of us dies before we reconcile.

I do not want that to happen.

I realize that you have no reason to write to me anymore, at least not the same sort of reason you had before. I hope you will keep it up anyway. I would claim, Harry, that no other person alive knows you so well, and one of the pieces of knowledge I have of you is that you will write back.

All my love,

Lily.

Harry lowered the letter and put his head on his knees. His breath was coming short, and he felt, horribly, as if he were about to cry. He scrubbed at his eyes. If he started crying now, he knew, he wouldn't stop. Worry over Connor had kept him awake last night, that and racing thoughts. He was losing his ability to remain awake without it affecting his emotions, even as Millicent had said he would. He couldn't let that happen. He had to remain strong, awake, aware, if only for his allies. He would dose himself with a sleeping potion tonight.

He had managed to remain as alert and aware as he had so far thanks to Lily's training. Hours spent in studying, hours spent in concentration, practice at being a sentry, depriving himself of sleep when necessary and getting used to the resulting sensations...all those were techniques he had trained in, and things that he knew how to do. All of those, she had had a share in, either observing him when he was practicing them, the only one who did, or actually suggesting them. She was a huge part of his life. She knew so much about him that Harry was not about to reveal to anyone else, ever.

How could he just leave her behind, cut her off when she was reaching out for contact?

Oh, part of it was painful, of course, the same urge that might tell him to nudge a dangling tooth with his tongue. But he couldn't not write

back. He might have managed it if she had written him a letter full of scathing hatred, or one in which she simply urged him to drop his allies and become a Light wizard. But she hadn't.

Because she knew you would reject that, whispered a voice in his head that sounded like Snape's. She is using her knowledge of you against you, Harry. You know that, just as you know that part of the reason you want to forgive her is that she trained you into that.

Harry banished the voice, and sat in silence as clear-headed as he could make it for a moment, with fatigue and pain battling for preeminence. He had to consider needs and duties other than those he owed himself and Lily. Last weekend had reminded him that he was part of a wider context. What would that wider context say about this? Would writing back to Lily help other people?

Even there, though, there was a conflict. He knew that Snape and Draco would urge him not to write back. He knew that Millicent and Pansy and Blaise would sneer, and say that she'd got what she deserved—if they knew the full story, which none of them did—and that being a Muggleborn witch was only one step up from being Muggle anyway, and she'd reverted to her natural condition of life. (He had never confronted them about that, either).

But he also knew that he would not be able to think about anything else until he had written back, that the unanswered letter would nag him both with pain and a sense of guilt. The guilt would unbalance his reactions to everything else, and he couldn't afford that. The pain was not so easy to get rid of, but he would endure a swift, clean stroke better than a festering wound in the back of his mind.

He took a deep breath, and drew parchment from his robe pocket. It was not the honesty-charmed parchment he'd taken from Dumbledore. He was going to be honest anyway, of course. His mother knew him well enough to be able to tell if he lied.

Lily:

I don't see how we can reconcile, ever. How can we? Dad and I have problems between us now. I have a much better relationship with

Connor than I did last year, but I'm not sure it would survive reuniting our family. And you—

I—

Furious with himself, Harry squeezed his eyes shut. A tear had had the nerve to fall on the parchment, and now he couldn't think of what to write. His throat ached as if he'd been running for miles in freezing cold air. He waited, swallowing several times, until the tears had gone and he could continue. He knew he'd had a narrow escape from the flood of emotion that was waiting for him.

I know that you made me what I am. And there are times I hate and loathe that. But it's saved me so much recently. It spared me from incredible temptations. It's helped me and my allies achieve victories, a few in the last couple of weeks. So I can't say that I hate and disclaim you, because you're so bound up with that, and you're the only one I'll ever be able to really discuss it with. There are times I burn to discuss it with someone, but not the kind of people who wouldn't understand. And you're the only one who will understand, as well as the only one who knows.

And you're right that I can't ignore it, and periods of restitution do have to have an end. I'm not ready for that end yet, though. I'm not ready to see you, not ready to forgive you for the phoenix web, not ready to try and reconcile.

Please, don't send me any more letters. I was only good at answering the first one because I thought I had to be. This isn't a good letter, and I know it, but it says what I want it to say.

Harry.

He finished it, and choked back the large lump trying to rise up his throat, and stood, calling for Hedwig. She landed on his shoulder, and he stroked her feathers for a moment, forcing himself to focus on the incredible whiteness of them. She was the only snowy owl in the Owlery. She looked beautiful when she was flying. She had carried his truce-gifts to Lucius. He thought about all those things, to avoid thinking about what she was carrying right now.

He bound the letter to her leg. "Lily Potter, girl," he whispered, when she looked at him expectantly.

Hedwig nibbled at his ear, and hooted softly, a sound that Harry could convince himself was sad if he let his mind run about like a mad thing. Harry watched her fly out of sight. He could see a web binding her if he looked, but he closed his eyes and turned away. He had to admit that he wasn't ready to see the webs, not yet. He had to be a vates, and he had to be one whenever a magical creature needed him, but there was no magical creature requiring his help just at the moment. The webs only existed. He could unbind them in time.

"There you are."

Harry jolted. He hadn't realized anyone was coming up the Owlery stairs, and he really should have, since he could recognize the feel of this woman's magic. He pressed his back against the stones and murmured, "Dissimulo odoratum, dissimulo—"

"It's too late, Harry." Hawthorn Parkinson's voice was gentle. "I've already smelled you. And seen you, too."

Harry heard a rustle, and suspected that she was kneeling down on the floor of the Owlery, utterly forgetting her fine robes. He was startled beyond all bearing when she reached out and gathered him into her arms. She didn't hold him very close, loosening her hold a bit when he struggled, but she didn't let him go completely, either.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered.

"I asked the Headmaster for permission to visit Pansy," Hawthorn said.

"But you aren't."

Hawthorn shrugged, or at least Harry thought so from the motion of her arms on his shoulders. "I did see my daughter. I came to look at someone else on whom most of us depend, too."

“I’m better than I was on Halloween.” Harry pitched his voice as convincingly as he could. To his horror, it wasn’t very convincing. He tried to withdraw behind his Occlumency shields, and found even those shredded, as though his emotions were briars and had punched holes in them. He wrapped one arm around his face. That much he could manage, at least, so that Hawthorn wouldn’t see his tears. He did not want her to think him weak, not when they had sworn formal alliance together just a year ago. That would weaken her, too. “I am trying to take care of myself. I know it’s not working very well right now, but my brother faces the First Task tomorrow. I’ll be better when that’s past. I’m going to take a sleeping potion tonight.”

“It should never have come to this point in the first place,” said Hawthorn, voice low and determined. “It will not come to this point in the future.”

Harry’s uncertain emotions wavered and tipped over into anger. He felt a wind pick up, blowing around the Owlery, and the stones at his back frosted over. Hawthorn took a sharp breath, but didn’t withdraw from him.

“I don’t care how many spies you put on me,” Harry snapped, still not lowering his arm. The tears weren’t gone yet, not entirely, though he could manage a ferocious scowl in a few minutes. “I’ll still work as hard as I can, and I would think you would appreciate that, since some of that work benefits you.”

Hawthorn was silent for a long moment. Then she said, “Harry, I am going to tell you a story.”

Harry snorted.

“Not a fey tale,” said Hawthorn. “A real one. A story that started not much more than a year ago.

“There was a witch once who did things she wasn’t proud of. She wouldn’t disown them, but she wasn’t proud of them. When someone came to her and wanted her to renew those activities, she refused. She was proud enough to think there would be no retaliation for

refusing. She had a lovely home now, and a wonderful husband, and a pretty daughter. She had a life. She'd moved on and left those dark things behind. How could they touch her?

"They did, of course. They touched her so deeply that they put a wolf into her soul, and she heard it whispering to her all the time. She still hears it. Its words are savage, and it hates you, and it wants to consume everything she comes near. It can take over her body on the full moons. It made her into a slaving beast on the first one she endured. The memory of that night still makes her shudder.

"But every full moon since then, she has had her own mind. She still transforms, but the full moon is when the wolf goes silent, and the rest of the time she can control it. Do you know why, Harry?"

Harry gave a sulky little pull, trying to get out of Hawthorn's embrace. She ignored him, indeed tightening her arms, and Harry was reminded that Remus, too, was much stronger than he looked when he wanted to be.

"Because a thirteen-year-old wizard—well, he's fourteen, now—saw her when she was sweating in the terror of her first transformation, and offered to brew a potion for her that lets her keep her own mind." Hawthorn's voice was so soft that Harry could have mistaken it for Pansy's; he had never realized before how much Pansy sounded like her mother. "He offered it on no other condition that she not ally with those who had hurt her, who were also his enemies. She gave him a book as a gift in thanks, but there is no thanks enough for opening her eyes in the moonlight, and feeling her limbs shift and change, and the wolf in her mind fall silent instead of howling. When she speaks back to the moon, she does it as herself."

Her embrace tightened again, and Harry found his face resting against warmth—her shoulder.

"If you never did anything else for me," said Hawthorn, shifting the pronouns of the story just when Harry was least prepared to deal with it, "that would have been enough. It would be more than enough. You never need be afraid that I would think you weak, Harry. You saw me in my weakest hour, and you chose to give me back my strength. You

never hesitated. Someone with that much compassion inside him is assured of more than allies. He is assured of friends, and deathless loyalty. Do not worry about weakening me, or anyone else who has allied with you. Lean on our strength when you must, and then stand and go on. There is no shame in this, ever.”

Harry felt as if he were drifting beyond speech or thought. Hawthorn sounded as if she were speaking the truth. And that meant that she really saw him as someone like that, someone strong and compassionate...

He began to cry, and couldn't stop himself.

Hawthorn said nothing, simply holding him. Harry didn't lower his arm, but she didn't tell him to. She just murmured the same words over and over, and when Harry's sobs quieted and the tears finished choking him, he could make out what they were. “You gave me back my strength. Thank you.”

Harry took a deep breath. He had wept, and he could believe, just, that Hawthorn did not think him weak or foolish for it. He began to draw back.

Hawthorn still didn't move her arms, and then, with another sign of that strength that he kept forgetting she had, picked him up and off the ground.

“You're already missing classes,” she said quietly. “And though I know that you have other needs, I think sleep is the most important one, now that you have shed your tears. You stink of exhaustion.” Her voice was gentle, so that Harry might hear that she was teasing.

“I was going to take a sleeping potion tonight,” Harry said, and could hear his words slurring. “But I have lessons that I'm teaching to other students this afternoon. I was going to—”

“No,” said Hawthorn calmly. “Pansy gave me the Slytherin password. I'm taking you back to your room. You'll take the sleeping potion now, assuming you need it. I don't think you will, not when you get a pillow behind your head.”

That was Harry's fear, too. He pushed at Hawthorn, of course ineffectually. "I don't want to fall asleep yet. I want—"

"What you want and what you need are two different things," said Hawthorn, heading towards the steps down from the Owlery. "And what you need should win, I think."

Harry fought. He had techniques for this. Lily had taught some to him, and some he'd learned by experience. He fought the relaxing in his muscles, the insidious warmth that was calling to him. He had lessons to teach. He thought he knew how to break through the block on Ron's magic, if...

He started when he realized that the ghostly images of the lessons he'd been seeing on the backs of his eyelids were the precursors of dreams, and tried to jerk back awake. He couldn't even open his eyes, though.

He felt something soft beneath his head, and someone rolled him over enough that he wasn't lying on his arm. He murmured something about lessons and Connor, and then sleep hooked him and dragged him away like a Portkey.

Harry awakened briefly. He blinked at the dark room, and the intense warmth curled around him. He realized he was in Draco's arms. Draco had apparently decided to crawl into his bed and hold him without so much as a by-your-leave.

Harry realized that he could use more sleep, from the dust weighing his eyes down, but he had slept some hours, and that ought to be enough. He squirmed, and that woke Draco up.

"Go use the loo," Draco whispered. "And then come back."

Harry shook his head. "I wasn't thinking about that—"

"Yes, I know," said Draco, voice sharpening now as he looked into Harry's eyes. "And it doesn't matter. Did you know I fainted in Transfiguration, because I was picking up your exhaustion?" He

sounded disgusted, but Harry didn't know if it was with Harry or himself.

"I'm sorry—"

"Not enough anymore," said Draco. "Damn it, Harry, this is going to stop. So go to the loo, if that's what you need to do, and then come back here. It's two in the morning. You still have seven hours before you need to wake up and watch your bloody prat of a brother survive the First Task. I'm sure that he will. Everything is going to be fine, since you've been training him."

Harry hesitated for a long moment, weighing the pros and cons of staying awake right now in his mind. He could go out into the Forbidden Forest if he stayed awake now, perhaps.

And in the morning, he would have to deal with an angry Draco, whom apologies weren't enough to content any more, and he would still have to watch Connor face the dragons, and Millicent and Blaise and Pansy would doubtless yell at him, and he would still attract unwanted attention from the other Slytherins.

And he would lose the warmth and languor pulling at his muscles now.

He bowed his head, padded into the loo, brushed his teeth, and relieved himself. He avoided looking into the mirror.

Then he came back and curled up next to Draco, who immediately moved over to him and slung an arm over his side. Harry pressed closer to the warmth despite himself and closed his eyes. It's all right, he reassured himself. Draco won't tell anyone about this. No one else can see.

"Good night, Harry," Draco whispered, stroking his forehead.

Harry let out a deep sigh, and, for the first time in far too many days, relaxed.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Wildest of Them All

He had been right the first time, Draco thought, once he was awake enough to think coherently. This had to stop.

He looked down at Harry, who was still curled up on his side, his breathing deep and relaxed. Peaceful, Draco thought. He traced one finger over Harry's forehead, lightly enough that he wouldn't wake him, and found no trace of blood on the scar. There was no pain in his own brow, either, but he was no longer sure that he trusted that part of his empathy. There were nights where he felt no agony, and yet Harry still had dark circles under his eyes in the morning.

Of course, now I know he probably wasn't sleeping at all.

The thought made Draco narrow his eyes. There were many things that had to stop, really. That was only the most obvious of them—Harry's staying up until all hours because he was utterly convinced that his duties for other people needed to be accomplished immediately. But since it was the most obvious, Draco intended to make sure that it stopped, whether or not Harry was enthusiastic about the idea.

The rest...

You might as well admit it to yourself, you know. You can have all the arguments with him you like, storm around in high dudgeon, hint and yell at him until you go blue in the face. He's never going to realize that you're in love with him until you flat out tell him, honestly, like a Gryffindor.

Draco shuddered. He tried to convince himself that it was all disgust, that it came from the thought of acting like a Gryffindor.

He knew well enough that that wasn't true.

He was nervous. Oh, he knew that Harry cared for him, and was his best friend. He didn't know that Harry was in love with him, and every instinct he had, every Slytherin instinct, screamed at him not to betray himself until he was assured of some equal emotion in return. It

would hurt too much to see Harry's eyes cloud over, and hear Harry's voice tell him gently that he was incapable of returning the feeling.

And it's not even that, Draco thought, able to approach the truth, here in the warm bed in early morning, that he'd been denying to himself and ignoring all week. I think Harry could date me, sure. But he'd do it because that's what I wanted. He values me like he values other people, as someone with a soul he never wants to damage and freedom he immensely respects.

He doesn't value me more.

And that's not enough.

I'm never going to be another of his sacrifices. I won't accept any gift he offers me that I can't return. And I won't offer him anything he can't return, either.

Draco laid his head back down on the pillow and closed his eyes, adjusting his arm so that it held Harry more tightly. He could feel Harry, unselfconscious as he only was when asleep, let out a little sigh and move closer to the source of warmth and pleasure. That was another problem, Draco thought, though not as severe as the fact that Harry only held him as important in the way the rest of the world was. When he was awake, Harry seemed to consciously recoil from pleasure of any kind. He took comfort only when he was utterly broken down, and every other touch he offered was a means of giving it.

I don't know how I can overcome that. Even empathy only tells me what he's feeling, not how to make him feel better.

Draco bit the side of his mouth. The books he'd been reading on empathy had defined it further and further from him—unsurprisingly, since it was never something he'd cared to look up before he was cursed with it. They'd made it clear that empathy wasn't just a fool's or a sop's gift, that he was not the helpless bearer of emotions from the wide world. He could choose to tune his empathy to one particular person, and in fact, the books suggested, that would act as a shield against the random dumping of feelings from the masses.

Harry's emotions were sharp and strong, and Draco cared about him. He was the obvious choice.

That was the reason he felt the physical pain from Harry's scar, and why he'd fainted in Transfiguration yesterday from the pain and fatigue he could sense pouring through their link—not from the stress of not knowing where Harry was, which Blaise had taunted him with. He could break the link, if he wanted, but he didn't think he'd be able to. He had to really desire to do that. He didn't.

And that's what it came down to, in the end, the unanswerable answer to all the other objections his mind and common sense might raise to being with Harry.

I can't back away from him. I can't love someone else the way I love him. No matter what the problems to being in love with him are, I'm backed against a wall, and I'll just have to find solutions to the problems.

This helplessness has got to stop, too.

Even though he hadn't found answers, only made a decision, Draco felt sleep creeping back in to claim him. It was still an hour until they had to be up, eat breakfast, and watch the First Task. Harry needed the sleep, and Draco needed to be here, far more than anything else at the moment.

He closed his eyes, and let himself sink into golden-green warmth. Harry kept his head ducked as he picked at his breakfast. He hadn't really dared to look anyone in the eye since he came to the Slytherin table. He knew, just from sidelong glances, that most of them knew about Hawthorn carrying him to the common room, and so about his breakdown.

He was embarrassed beyond measure to have showed weakness like that.

Hawthorn said it wasn't weakness, the voice that sounded like Snape in his head reminded him, but hers was one assurance against an army of gazes. Harry couldn't control how everyone else reacted, and if they were watching him and reporting back to their parents as he now knew some of them did, then they might report things that could put his allies in danger.

Damn it.

"Harry."

Harry started and glanced up, only to find himself in a small pen of his yearmates. Draco leaned close on his left, Millicent on his right, and Pansy stood behind him. Vince and Blaise sat on the outskirts. Vince looked mostly interested in his plate, but Blaise was watching Harry with palpable curiosity.

"What?" he whispered.

"You remember what I said to you last night," Draco murmured, "about this stopping? That it had to stop?"

Harry nodded. "I don't want to skip as much sleep as I did again." I've learned the consequences of that. "I can promise you. I might need reminders sometimes about when to go to bed, but that won't happen again."

Draco cocked his head. "That's a start, but not all of it. Although I'm pleased that you've learned at least that lesson." His eyes flicked over Harry's head, and Harry suspected that he'd felt a stir in Millicent's emotions. "You had something to say?"

Harry turned expectantly to meet her eyes. Millicent looked startled for the briefest of seconds, before she shrugged and picked up the chance that Draco had handed her.

"Yes, I did," she said, eyes on Harry. "I know that the formal alliance you made with our families runs both ways. However, you're in more need of protection right now than we are. The fact that you're in more

danger has something to do with that, as well as the fact that our families will come to our aid if we call, and yours...won't."

Harry nodded, grateful that she'd put it so delicately. "What are you suggesting?"

"Stop worrying so much about your obligations to us," said Millicent. "You've granted our requests. It's time that we granted you something. That's going to be protection, and help, and anything else that we can do."

"You were already doing that," Harry protested, trying to understand why what Millicent proposed was any different from what had been going on. "You tell your parents what I'm doing, and—"

"No," said Pansy. Harry turned and blinked at her. "I haven't written a letter to Mother about you in a week, Harry," she said softly. "She showed up here yesterday on her own. Something about concern and your being better at resisting an attack you knew was coming than one you didn't."

Harry snorted lightly. "I can believe that. But what are you proposing, then?"

"No more letters home about you, as long as something drastic doesn't happen," said Millicent. "If you get critically wounded or we think enemies are hunting you, then yes, of course, our parents should know about it. But we'll refrain from reporting on your every small movement. It only stresses you, and it distracts us from helping you more concretely. Besides, we don't need to do it if you really are going to make an effort to sleep and eat properly." She sounded mildly exasperated.

Harry stared at her.

"We'll help you, instead," said Millicent quietly. "And that's the real reason we're not going to act like minders and spies anymore, but like allies and friends. You're going to be our leader, Harry. We should at least get used to following you."

“Wait a minute—” Harry began, no longer thinking the new bargain was better than the old.

“That’s what we’re doing,” said Draco. “We’re going to treat you like an equal, Harry, and we expect you to do the same with us. For example, tell us if something is bothering you so badly that you can’t sleep. Offer us the chance to help with any tasks that you might have lying around and want someone else to pick up. That kind of thing.” He lifted his head and stared calmly back at Harry. “We discussed this yesterday. We think it’s best. Our parents are perceptive and intelligent and dedicated to helping you, but we’re the ones who’re around you day by day and can see what’s happening to you more quickly. Besides, this old way isn’t working, just like Millicent said. We’ll try it new, because, one way or another, your daily suffering is going to stop.”

Harry swallowed. He would be a fool to reject this offer, and not because it would probably increase the other Slytherins’ watchful surveillance

Equality. They know it’s important to me.

He couldn’t refuse a relationship that might protect them and at the same time give them equal standing and freedom. They spoke of being followers, but let them once get a taste of what real freedom and independence were like, and he thought they probably would not go back.

Slowly, he nodded. “All right, then,” he said. He managed to produce a smile. “I can’t think of anything that I want done today, except holding my hand while Connor passes the First Task,” he added lightly.

Draco grabbed his hand at once, and then glared at everyone else. Harry rolled his eyes. Merlin knows why he likes touching me so much. At least he isn’t going to be completely overprotective about me this time.

He went back to eating his breakfast. It took him until the middle of the meal to realize what the strange feeling in the center of his chest was.

He was free from a source of tension he hadn't known was there. He was very nearly happy.

"Welcome, professors, students, and judges, to the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament!"

Harry settled back in his seat and looked around the enclosure that had been created to hold the Task. The seats ringed it, as the stands did the Quidditch Pitch, and heavy wards glittered in front of them, protecting the actual grass of the enclosure from interference by spell. A small tent stood at the southern end of the enclosure. Viktor, Fleur, and Connor were in it now, Harry knew, preparing for the Task. He had caught his brother's eyes as they left the Great Hall this morning, and wished him a silent good hunting, but he hadn't actually got the chance to say anything to him. Nor had he seen him since.

Dumbledore stood in the stands on the opposite side of the enclosure, where most of the Hogwarts professors were seated, speaking with his voice enhanced with Sonorus. Harry didn't think it was coincidence that the Slytherins had brought him to sit in the stands facing Dumbledore. He wasn't sure what it meant that most of Slytherin House had come with them, though.

His gaze swept slowly past the stands on the eastern and western sides, and settled on what he hadn't wanted to look at.

The dragons.

There were three of them, all nesting mothers, crouched possessively over their eggs. A narrow corridor of wards led down the center of the enclosure, cutting the pen into thirds and offering restricted access to each dragon. Harry knew that each Champion would face only one dragon, and his nightmares of Connor having to defeat all three could be laid to rest.

Nonetheless, he could not regard the dragons with an easy eye. There were a Welsh Green, a Chinese Fireball, and a Hungarian Horntail waiting on the nests, now and then shifting so that the golden gleam of the false egg the Champions were supposed to retrieve could be seen. They might be distant, and the wards softened the outlines of their bodies and dimmed their roars, but they were still dragons, undeniably.

It didn't help that Harry had been feeling something like a wind in his mind since he had arrived in the enclosure, the same kind of sensation he felt around Connor's compulsion. But this wasn't compulsion. This was a distant roaring sound, like a storm, and it was coming from the dragons.

Harry shivered, and tried to turn his eyes to the tent. Dumbledore was saying something now about the first Champion emerging. He wondered if it would be Connor, and clenched his sweating palms together sharply.

"Ouch," Draco said.

Harry started. He'd forgotten that Draco was sitting beside him, never mind that the other boy had one of his hands clasped inside Harry's. The clench was putting a lot of pressure on his fingers. Harry opened his cramped fists. "Sorry," he breathed.

Draco shook his head, his eyes bright as he watched Harry. Harry frowned at him. What is it with him lately? Anyone would think he was pleased that I'd half-crushed his bloody hand.

The tent stirred, and Viktor Krum stepped out. The cheering from the Durmstrang students, most of them seated around the Slytherins, increased noticeably. Viktor, moving steadily towards the Chinese Fireball dragon, didn't seem to notice, though he did tilt his head slightly in acknowledgment.

Harry had expected Viktor to look awkward on the ground, as many large Seekers did, but he handled himself with both grace and speed as he made his way towards the dragon. His wand was in his hand, his face set in a ferocious scowl. Harry was reluctantly impressed. He

didn't think that Viktor regarded the danger he was in, or saw anything but the completion of his task.

The Chinese Fireball snarled and crouched over her eggs as Viktor came near. Harry found his gaze skimming past the Champion and settling on her again. Her scales shone violently scarlet, the same color as the scales he'd used for his disastrous potion that summer—as they should have, since liondragon was only another name for the Fireball. A fringe of golden spikes around her face lifted and lowered with her snarls. Eggs in the Gryffindor colors showed between her talons as they shifted.

Harry was still staring when the dragon slewed her head around, drawing in her breath as she prepared to flame, and Harry caught a glimpse of her eyes.

The roaring of the storm in his head increased. He abruptly felt another mind moving in concert with his, though unaware of it, rolling into his thoughts like an ocean consuming a stream. That mind was almost intolerably vast, and wild, and filled with something better than intelligence. That mind knew wind and flame and stone, and if it did not know water, that was a small loss. It—

Harry tore himself free with a gasp as the Chinese Fireball abruptly shook her head and cried out in pain. She'd barely had time to start her mushroom-shaped cloud of fire before Viktor's Conjunctivitis Curse hit her. Harry watched, his heart in his throat, as she went into convulsions, her long, elegant scarlet body whipping back and forth as Viktor dodged past her, swift and graceful still, and snatched up the golden egg. He was out beyond her reach in a moment, and the stands were exploding with shouts of his name and cries of congratulations.

Harry's eyes were on the dragon; he didn't seem able to look away. He felt small, sharp tingles of pain in his own skin as the Fireball smashed her own eggs, and then reared up on her haunches and pawed furiously at her eyes. He bowed his head, shivering. He was glad that Viktor had survived, of course—he would not have wanted to see someone die in the First Task, or in any of the Tasks—but part of him was still bound to the dragon, hurting as she hurt.

“Harry?”

Draco's hand on his brought him back. Harry nodded and snatched his head up, gasping out air and then breathing it in again, trying to remind himself that he had a human chest and human lungs. He couldn't breathe fire. And he had a human voice, too, in which he whispered, “I'm all right,” as the Chinese Fireball crouched over the smashed remains of her eggs and trumpeted her loss.

Harry could hear the judges discussing the matter. In the end, while Viktor received a passable score, he had points removed for the loss of the eggs.

He shouldn't get any points at all, Harry thought, his mind unexpectedly quick and turning, vicious, and then he let out a sharp breath and buried his head in his hands.

What is happening to me? The presence of any other Dark creature has never affected me like this.

He did remember what Dobby had said about dragons being the wildest of all magical creatures, but that didn't mean they should be affecting him like this. He swallowed and turned back to the tent as Fleur emerged, walking towards her dragon, the Welsh Green. He was watching the Task. He was not mourning, with fierce heat and mounting flame, the loss of so many young lives in the smashed eggs.

Draco kept on stroking his hand as Fleur faced the Green, and Harry settled further into his own thoughts. He had no reason to have that same kind of reaction to this dragon. Perhaps the reaction to the Fireball was because it was the first dragon he'd seen in action, Harry reassured himself. It was just the surprise and shock of it all. He was used to it now.

That theory held right up until Fleur, trying to draw the dragon's attention with a flirt of her silver hair, danced towards the western side of the enclosure, where Harry sat. The dragon, as brilliantly green as the Fireball had been scarlet, tracked her movements, and her eyes swept over Harry.

Harry found himself standing on the shore of another enormous mind, this one sharper and stronger than the Fireball, not as nervous, but more vicious. Thoughts rose and fell like waves. There were the eggs behind her, under her, to be protected, but more than that, there was the enemy. A few moments more, and she would be in the perfect position to breathe fire at.

Fleur moved.

The Welsh Green breathed.

Harry opened his own eyes in time to see the narrow jet just barely miss Fleur's face, setting her robes alight, but at the same time, he was feeling heat churn in his belly, flex up his throat, and blast out in front of him. He was seeing the world glittering in a hundred shades that had no names, and everywhere were smaller things than he was, deserving of no respect, and there were the eggs, and he would stamp on this annoying small thing if there was no other way to get rid of it...

The Welsh Green stamped down a talon, lunging off her nest as she did so. Once again, Fleur was too quick.

And this time, she began to sing.

Harry felt the immense mind in front of him begin to frost over, the wildness subsiding as it listened to the song, like the mother's cradle-song. The Welsh Green half-slumped, brilliant eyes shutting, and the spell somewhat broke. Harry closed his eyes, and kept them shut, even when the roar of approbation told him that Fleur had succeeded in snatching her egg.

"Harry?" That was Millicent this time. "If you need more sleep, or if you don't think that you can watch your brother, then we'll take you back to bed."

"No," Harry said, forcing his eyes open. Connor. Connor is next. "I—something about the dragons is affecting me. I don't know what."

Pansy drew in her breath. "Wildness," she whispered.

"What?" Harry blinked at her over his shoulder, glad to have the excuse to look away from the dragons. The Welsh Green was waking up now, and her rage at finding one of her eggs was gone knew no bounds.

"It's the reason that my mother decided not to come today." Pansy's eyes met his, filled with a knowledge that she didn't look like she enjoyed having. "Dragons are so wild that sometimes their minds reach out and touch the minds of wizards who have a certain susceptibility to wildness themselves. She knew the wolf in her would answer the dragons, and she had no mind to transform in front of an audience, which might happen this close to the full moon." Pansy wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "I didn't know they would affect you like this, though."

"Neither did I," said Harry, remembering what else Dobby had said. The dragons were wild, but they were not free.

Apparently their wildness was enough to let them affect the thoughts of a vates, though.

Harry shuddered, and then his brother stepped out of the tent and made his way down the third corridor towards the Hungarian Horntail.

Harry found that his gaze couldn't leave Connor. His brother had always dealt better with situations in progress than situations he had to anticipate and plan for. And now that he had a plan, he looked perfectly content. He walked with his head up, now and then glancing at the stands. Harry would have waved, but he didn't think Connor could see him, and he thought the motion would be jerky and stiff anyway, more apt to make Connor think Harry was choking to death than wishing him good luck.

Connor drew his wand when he was still a good distance from his dragon, to Harry's relief, and cast. "Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare!" Then he repeated it again, and again, and again, even as the first copy faded into being in front of him.

Harry felt a familiar sensation of wind a moment later. Connor's compulsion reached out and grasped the illusions, and they began to run in several different directions, one of them cutting to the left, two to the right, and another sliding in on his belly as though he were going to roll right under the dragon's legs and grab the golden shell. Harry had lost track of his brother in the mess of them.

The dragon roared.

Harry shuddered, and was abruptly inside her head, feeling the heavy tug and lift and shift of wings on her shoulders, the weight of horns on her head, the pressure of flame and wind in her mouth. The eggs, the eggs were beneath her, and so much information came from so many different directions that she could not locate the small thing, and there—

She snapped her jaws down. Harry felt his own terror tear him away from his intense identification with her for a moment, and then he was pulled back in as Connor's duplicate faded out of existence. It hadn't been him.

She turned her head in slow circles, backing and stamping, her feet falling in delicate patterns that of course wouldn't crush any of her children. She was irritated, and so the small enemy would die. There was nothing more to it than that. Things which irritated her died, most often by burning.

She smelled one of the many small enemies coming up on her left side, and she whipped her head around and breathed, the flame striking and bouncing from the magic around her. Another two images faded.

Then she felt pressure, tickling pressure, against her belly. She flicked her tail around and gathered herself, prepared to reach down and secure her eggs the moment she determined what it was.

More duplicates erupted from beneath her belly, scuttling like nesting ants. One of them grabbed at her eggs, and she screamed and lifted her wings, propelling herself into a hovering rear that would protect her children from any imaginable enemy.

Many, many small enemies running in circles. She would kill them all. She took a deep breath, and snapped her head around in a circle, flaming across the ground. The grass caught on fire. Her eggs, of course, used to heat, merely baked and soaked it in, rather than being destroyed.

One of the images rolled over and over, just under the flame, clutching the golden egg close to its chest, and then it was over and under and across the grass, and away, and she had lost a child.

Harry returned abruptly to himself as someone shook his shoulders and slapped his face. He gasped, sitting bolt upright, and blinked around. He saw Connor at the far end of the enclosure again, and heard the cheers, and knew that his brother was safe and had succeeded.

"We've got to get you out of here," Pansy was saying worriedly. "I don't know how you can keep your mind around the dragons when they start using the spells to confine them and transport them."

Harry nodded and stood. He would congratulate Connor later. What mattered now was that his brother had survived, more than that he had won.

Then he felt a wind surge past his ears, and it carried the sound of freedom with it, whispered in a simple word from one of the small ones: Imperio.

Harry turned sharply. The Hungarian Horntail was rearing, and he could feel her mind contained neatly in the chains of the Imperius Curse, directed and given a cunning and intelligence she would not have achieved on her own. She turned broadside to the wards and pressed her hide against them, the hide that protected dragons from most magical forms of attack.

The wards snapped, and then fell, opening up the three lanes and permitting the dragons to catch sound and scent of each other.

And then the wards around the enclosure fell with a crash and sparkling cascade of magic, and the dragons could see the audience. Harry could feel the moment when the Fireball's and the Green's seething hatred turned to decision, the decision that the Imperius-controlled Horntail had already come to. There were many small things around them. They could kill and feast and take vengeance for the loss of their children.

The Horntail spread her wings and breathed, her flame shooting towards the western stands where a large group of Ravenclaw students sat.

Harry was on his feet almost before he realized what was happening. "Protego!"

The Shield Charm had to be enormous to protect all the students involved, but it had Harry's will behind it, and his desperation. The flame splattered out in a shining flower against the shield. The dragon screamed her displeasure, and then she was aloft, circling, her shadow blotting out the sun, her neck lowered and her throat already flexing with the next jet of flame.

The Welsh Green joined her in the air a moment later, roaring hungrily, and the Chinese Fireball turned with frightening speed and power, on foot, towards the eastern set of stands. Adult wizards were hurling spells now, but most of them bounced without effect from the dragons' hides, and they were hindered by the need to protect several hundred running, screaming, crying students.

Harry slammed a hand onto Draco's shoulder. "This is where I need your help," he said, lifting his voice to be heard over the screaming and the roaring. "I know what I'm going to do. Your job is to protect the people around you—get the other people who've had lessons with me to help you—while not hurting the dragons."

Draco blinked at him in disbelief. "Not hurt the dragons? Why?"

Harry smiled. He knew it was a horrid smile, more like the rictus of a corpse. "Because," he said, "I'm going to need all my wit and power to defeat them, and I can feel it when they're hurt. Accio Firebolt!"

The Summoning Charm worked rather like a slingshot, given how desperate he was, snatching up the broom Draco had given him for his birthday and hurling it to him. Harry flung a leg over it and kicked off before anyone could say or do anything to stop him. He felt the wind in his hair and the familiar exaltation rising, which was good. It was something to keep him anchored in his own body as he swept towards the dragons and felt the pressure of three mighty minds.

First to draw their attention.

He spun under the Horntail's belly, the flight of something else in the air with her drawing even her Imperius-controlled eyes, and then dived towards her nest. For a moment, his vision was filled with scales, his nostrils with the stink of dragon-hide and fire, and then he was past again and spiraling down in a long stretch of light and dark straight towards the cement-colored eggs.

Not even an Unforgivable Curse could control a mother dragon's protectiveness of her eggs. The Horntail turned back towards him, free of the spell, screaming, and then she was flying fast, right behind him, the wind from her wings hard and wild enough to blow his broom off-course.

Harry turned his broom upside-down and put on another burst of speed, avoiding both the maddened Horntail's claws and the whip-like tail of the Welsh Green, who'd turned towards him when he soared over her nest. Their minds attacked him, the sensations of hunger and hunting and killing and righteous anger slicing through his thoughts right at the same time as he needed to perform a complicated double roll maneuver.

Harry closed his eyes and let his mind deal with the attack while his body dealt with the flying. Dive and loop and turn and roll and roll, and then he was past and up again, rising like a hawk from the nests, with the Horntail right behind him, tail tucking primly up against her belly so she wouldn't damage her own eggs.

The Welsh Green was in the air and swerving towards him now, drawn by his flying or his contact with her mind or his magic. And

Harry could feel the Chinese Fireball turning, too, intent on finding out what had caused the disturbance in the others. A moment of beating wings and nervous scraping at the ground, and then she was aloft.

Great. I have their attention.

Now I just need to figure out what the hell I'm going to do with it. Draco knew when he could argue with Harry, and now wasn't one of those times. Determination, hard as dragon-hide, had pushed at Draco like a wall when Harry had spoken of what he wanted them to do. And it was true that he couldn't have followed, anyway, since the charms put on the Firebolt would only allow Harry to fly it.

That didn't mean he didn't turn to the other Slytherins with a hard pounding in his ears.

"Pansy," he said, "carry the word to the other people who've been attending lessons with him."

Pansy gave him an eloquent, confused look. There were people milling everywhere around them, uncertain which direction to run. In all this? her eyes said for her, with no need to state it aloud.

"You're a witch, for Merlin's sake," Draco hissed at her, and then turned to Millicent. "You know what he's been teaching in those lessons?"

"I do," said Millicent. "I came along and listened sometimes. Cast a Disillusionment Charm on myself so no one would be too particular about me being there. I think I know how to confuse a dragon." She held out her wand. "Speculum Ardoris!"

A shield of flames spurted out of her wand and shot towards the red dragon; Draco thought it was a Chinese Fireball, though he wasn't sure. The flames curled around the dragon's face, obscuring it from view, and an annoyed roar came from it. Draco swallowed. It would have to work. A dragon wouldn't be hurt by fire. The dragon really was only irritated, not hurt, and Harry wouldn't fall from his broom like a bundle of limp rags at any moment.

Other people seemed to have the same idea. Cries of “Speculum Ardoris!” rose from other places in the stands, and Draco breathed easier when he saw the small, brave, insane figure still on his broom, dodging sweep after sweep of claws and tails and jets of flame.

Draco took a deep breath and began to concentrate, hard, on the strongest protection spell he knew. He had to protect; he didn’t know all the spells that Harry had been teaching the other students, and Pansy had finally thought to cast Sonorus so she could shout at people, and he was feeling emotions sweeping over him like a tide, now that Harry was no longer right next to him.

The strongest protection spell he knew happened to be Dark Arts, taught to him by his father just before he left for Hogwarts, in case he encountered more enemies there than he thought.

Too bad. People will live with it.

“Defensor vindictae!”

Waves of black coolness spread out around Draco, inundating the stands and freezing the stupid students who couldn’t do anything but run and scream in place. He opened his eyes. Since he was the source of the spell, he could see above it and the dark blanket it cast, and see the form it assumed.

Immense eyes opened in the blanket near the end of the stands, and looked at Draco. Draco nodded, and managed to lift his hands through the mist and clasp them in front of him.

Fists surged up just beneath the eyes. Let one of the dragons, or another hostile force, try to attack those under the Dark spell, and it would pummel them, presumably to death. Draco didn’t know, since his father had only permitted him to try out the spell with non-lethal force behind it.

Not this time. This time, he was going to defend people, both for his own sake and because Harry had asked him to.

Harry.

Draco's eyes went back to the sky, where one of the pieces of his life rode his broom in a death-defying dance, and felt his stomach contract. He wanted to be sick, but instead, he stood prepared to defend. Because Harry had asked him to.

Please, you stupid prat, come back alive to see how well I listened. Hermione wondered why she was the one who had to think of everything. Speculum Ardoris could only do so much, and the Dark Arts spell Malfoy had used only reached across half the stands, and Parkinson was shouting her head off about not harming the dragons, and Harry, the brave, stupid idiot, was circling on high with three incredibly dangerous Dark creatures after him. They might not be able to hurt the dragons, but they had to insure Harry survived long enough to do whatever it was that he wanted to do.

It wasn't that she minded thinking of everything, so much. It would just be nice if other people could assume the burden, too.

She raised her wand, carefully focused on the Hungarian Horntail, who was closest to Harry, and whispered the same spell that she'd heard Connor use when he faced that dragon.

In a moment, there were two copies of Harry in the air, and then three, as she whispered the spell again, and then four. Hermione could feel herself sweating as she concentrated on holding the images steady. It was harder than she'd expected, doing it from this distance, and controlling so many at once.

But she was a powerful witch. She could do this. She hadn't needed any soppy pureblood ritual to do it, either. She only needed her will and her magic, and she already knew she was a match for most of the purebloods in the school.

The Horntail roared in irritation, and left off chasing the real Harry to swat at one of the images. The Welsh Green was getting into the action, too, clamping her teeth down and screeching as the image

melted into thin air. Hermione smiled, but she was getting dangerously tired, and she didn't think—

"Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare."

Hermione nearly sagged in relief as someone else whispered the spell, and then an arm curled around her shoulders, supporting her. She didn't even mind that much when she looked up and saw it was Zacharias Smith. Smith wasn't really all that bad, once you got used to him and his more annoying ways.

"I can't believe no one else is doing anything to help him," she said.

"Well, the professors are protecting the students on this side," Zacharias said in his cool drawl. "I suspect they thought that was more important than just one student, no matter how powerful."

Hermione scowled at him. "Yes, but none of the other students are doing this, either!"

"Perils of being the smartest, Hermione," said Zacharias, calling her by her first name for one of the few times she could remember. "You get to do all the other work that other people can't even think of. Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare."

Hermione fixed her gaze on Harry again and repeated the spell, deciding she was recovered enough to do it now. She would never share, ever, how much Zacharias's words had warmed her.

Harry was grateful for the images that appeared suddenly around him, and for the protective magic he could feel at his back, and the Flame Mirror spells dodging through the air. Grateful, but he didn't know what to do with the time they were buying him. All the dragons were very much focused on him; he could, if he concentrated a bit, get images of himself through three pairs of eyes.

You have a connection to their minds. Use it.

That was the problem, though, Harry thought, as he looped around the Welsh Green's latest attempt to bring him down with fire. The

other magical creatures he knew wore webs. He did not know how to free these dragons when they wore none.

But they are wild and not free. They must be bound somehow. What way could they be bound that's outside wards and the spells they were using to confine them in those pens?

Harry concentrated on that, dodging quick little jabs into their minds, trying to figure out the high-strung nervousness of the Chinese Fireball, the cool viciousness of the Welsh Green, the anger of the Hungarian Horntail, and how he could use that to his advantage without falling off his broom if he tried.

He felt what he thought he had to do in a moment. There were boundaries, after all. If the dragons' minds were oceans or lakes, there were still the shores at the edges of them, those things their thoughts would not cross or contain. He wondered what lay beyond them, behind them, what kind of freedom the dragons would manage if they could think beyond their wildness for a moment.

He took a deep breath and pulled up, hovering, on his broom.

The Horntail loomed in front of him, her front legs lifted, her claws spread wide, her head turned broadside to him. Her gleaming eye caught and held his, and Harry let himself be swept as on the wind of Legilimency, or the wind that had borne him through the darkened gate on Walpurgis Night, into her mind.

He brought with him the music he had heard when he circled on the thestral's back above the Forbidden Forest, and he unleashed it into the Horntail's mind, filling her thoughts with a booming chorus that focused on freedom and joy rather than the ravenous anger and hunger and mother-terror that had ridden her.

He slipped through her thoughts, rose on the shore of her ocean-like mind, and then crashed beyond it. The Horntail was listening to music she had long forgotten, or not thought about, since they had brought her to Hogwarts. There were bindings on her after all, though they had come from her own nature and not from any spells that the Dragon Keepers had cast. Prodded into despair and fury over her

nest, she had forgotten there might be more to life than the immediate moment. That was the surest way for wizards to make dragons forget themselves so they could control them: just stir up their emotions, and they forgot about freedom.

Harry slipped out and through the other side, and opened his eyes to find himself on his broom again, unconsumed by flame.

The Hungarian Horntail began to sing.

Harry cried out at the sweetness of it, bringing up a hand in front of his face as though to shield his eyes from a physical attack. His scar was tingling and burning, the way it had when the thestral licked the blood off it. The music blew past him, storm after storm of notes, soaring crescendos of sound. It was wild, yes, but it was also free, and the dragon had remembered that she could do things, be things, as well as oppose them.

She dipped her wings and flew around him, in a dizzying pattern that Harry vaguely recognized as an infinity symbol, centered on his broom. He could not draw his eyes from her long enough to confirm the pattern, though. The Horntail was blazing, as though the song she were singing had turned to light, and it edged her scales with burning glory, like the sun flooding through a stained glass window.

The voices of the Welsh Green and the Chinese Fireball rose a moment later, as though in response, and now Harry could feel their music joining with the immense currents of other music that ran just out of hearing, always rising from the Forbidden Forest. The Dark creatures did not cease to exist when the Light came, after all. The stars still shone when the sun had risen.

A dip and a sweep of tail and claws and limbs, all more impossibly graceful than before, and then the Horntail was hovering in front of him. Harry met her eyes, and found them consuming, as they had always been, but this time he plunged into freedom, and something better than freedom.

The dragons were elevated again to the position of calm joy that they should have occupied. They did not need to hurt anyone else,

because that sort of killing, mindless destruction was beneath them. They would take their eggs and go home, and there would be no more hurting.

The Horntail exhaled. Flame whirled out from her nostrils, but parted to either side of Harry, so that his broom did not become a Firebolt in truth. Harry felt it lick at his skin, but the touch was gentle, making him think of the warmth he recalled waking up to with Draco that morning, rather than the scorching, vicious pain he'd had every right to expect.

She's saying thank you.

The Horntail turned and stooped towards her nest, snapping up the corners of it in her claws. She hauled it easily off the ground, and then turned and soared east, into the brightening air. The Welsh Green and the Chinese Fireball dived, gathered up their eggs, and followed her, though the Welsh Green parted from the other two after a few moments of flying side by side. Harry watched her wheel west, and heard her voice reach back to him, a calling down of glory from above. The Fireball's song was softer, still hesitant, but full and rich and wonderful nonetheless.

Harry hovered on his broom and watched them until they were both out of sight. His heart hurt in his chest, and he could hear the music vibrating and crooning in his ears, tugging and tempting and calling.

It was no use. He still couldn't give himself to it.

Harry took a deep breath and headed towards the ground. He suspected that he would have a lot of explaining to do.

And he wanted some explanations of his own. Who had cast the Imperio, for example, and whether anyone was hurt.

Draco lifted the protection spell once the dragons were gone. That was partially so that he could avoid being questioned—much—about it, and partially so that he could get to Harry faster.

Harry landed not too far from the stands, and for a moment looked as though he couldn't get his hands to let go of his broom. Then he did, with an effort and a little surprised noise. He lifted his head, blinking, and his eyes sought out Draco.

Draco would always remember that. He was the one Harry looked to first, and part of him preened and gloried and rejoiced in the knowledge.

He smiled slowly, letting Harry know that he wasn't angry, at least for right now. Harry's shoulders sagged in visible relief.

Then Draco was out of the stands, and laying one hand on Harry's shoulder, and he was bathed in welcome weariness (like sand) and satisfaction (sweet candy on his lips) and more determination (like a stone wall). He murmured, because he could not speak of what was really rushing through his soul, "What maddened the dragons?"

"Someone cast the Imperius Curse," Harry breathed, and then laughed abruptly and sagged against Draco. "And now the sleep's all been undone, because I'm just as tired as I ever was."

Draco could tell that wasn't true. He rubbed one hand on the back of Harry's head, anyway, noticing that his scar was a more brilliant red than normal, but not bleeding—

At least, he looked at Harry until a sharp jet of fear summoned his attention. He turned his head, sharply, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the stands where most of the professors had sat. It felt as though it had come from there, which made no sense. Why was someone afraid now, and that strongly?

Dumbledore was watching Harry with a disappointed look on her face, McGonagall with a fiercely proud one. Moody was scowling at him, looking as displeased as ever—though that could be with Draco, and his display of Dark Arts.

Draco shook off the idea that he could find out who had been afraid right now, and cuddled closer to Harry as other people began to arrive. He knew where he most wanted to be, and he was in that

place right now. And Harry leaned on him without complaint, even shifting to follow Draco when he moved a bit, murmuring something about being warm and feeling safe.

Those problems will most definitely be solved somehow, because there's no way in hell I'm giving this up. Or him.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Serpent's Strike

"But what's the matter?" Blaise asked innocently, waving the Daily Prophet in Harry's face. "I would have thought you'd be pleased to see another article about you. Proves they haven't got tired of you yet."

Harry ground his teeth. If he could just respond calmly, or somehow banish the tide of blushing in his cheeks, then he could make Blaise stop teasing, he knew, but that was beyond him.

"It's been more than a week," he said, swallowing half his pumpkin juice at one gulp. Draco had to pound him on the back, and did so, more enthusiastically than was necessary. Harry shook his head when he could speak again. "You'd think they'd have forgotten about it by now."

He became aware immediately that he was the object of pitying stares from several directions. He met Millicent's eyes, and Pansy's, and Draco's, before he got tired of the game. "What?" he demanded.

"Potter," Blaise drawled. "Do you really think that a child defeating three adult dragons is going to be forgotten that easily?"

"I didn't defeat them, they flew off—"

"While the professors were doing nothing but standing around?" Blaise peeked at his paper. "Where is it—yes, there. 'Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore seemed confused by Harry Potter's presence in the air.'"

"They were defending the students—"

"And then you came back to the ground safely, after flying on your broom against dragons?" Blaise shook his head at him. "It's such a dramatic story, Harry. Of course they're going to love you."

"Of course I came back unharmed." Harry wanted to eat more of his toast, but he'd lost his appetite. He sighed and closed his eyes, massaging his forehead.

“Headache?” Millicent asked.

Harry peered at her, but she only looked sympathetic, not suspicious. “No,” he said. And it wasn’t, really. His scar hadn’t hurt much in the last week. This headache had more prosaic causes. “I just wish they’d give up and move on to something else.” He shook his head and stood. “Come on. McGonagall hasn’t forgiven me for missing Transfiguration last Friday yet.”

They’d just stood when Blaise, who was still looking at his paper, said, “Hello.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Didn’t you fight a witch named Umbridge?” Blaise asked, glancing at him in interest. “Says here that she’s been appointed Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

Harry felt his heart rate pick up. “That’s ridiculous,” he said to no one in particular. “She hated me because I was a Parselmouth. There’s no way that anyone would let her be in charge of the place where we’re supposed to go to register or be taken care of. There’s no way...” He shook his head, unable to think of the folly it would take for someone to appoint Umbridge there.

On the other hand, this is the Ministry, after all. And not everyone in it is like Rufus Scrimgeour.

“Doesn’t matter.” Blaise folded the paper with a careless shrug. “Sometimes Ministry politics are like that.”

“I know.” Harry didn’t speak the rest of what he was thinking aloud. If Umbridge was in a position where she could hurt magical creatures, that was a concern of his. He was vates. He had to think about this, and what it might mean for the future of magical creatures in Britain.

“Spill,” said Millicent.

Harry started slightly. "I was thinking about my allies," he said, nevertheless. He had tried, whenever he wasn't hiding around the corner from people who wanted to congratulate him on being a bloody hero, to be more open with the Slytherins, and explain what he worried about and why. "The centaurs and the rest of them. They aren't going to fare well with a bitch like Umbridge in power."

"You're always thinking of the larger picture, aren't you?" Millicent didn't sound condemning, just thoughtful.

"He always is."

That didn't come from Blaise, from whom it would have been sarcasm, but from Draco. Harry turned around and looked at him in astonishment. He was taken further off guard by the open light he saw shining in Draco's eyes, something like tenderness and something like pride.

Why is he looking at me like that? I mean, I know he's my friend, but friends don't usually look at friends like that.

Draco gave him a small smile, and said, "I take it that you want to do something about this, Harry."

"I—yes." Harry shook his head, and felt the Many snake stir on his arm. It was a welcome distraction from trying to figure out why the hell Draco had been looking at him like that when he hadn't done anything to merit it. "Millicent, can you come with me to the Forbidden Forest this afternoon? I think I should find you an egg-shaped stone and introduce you to the centaurs."

Millicent nodded, her face relaxing. "About time, Potter," she said, but she didn't sound annoyed with him.

"Attention, students."

Harry turned around in irritation. They'd been close to getting out of the Great Hall, but more than that, Dumbledore's announcements at breakfast had never been beneficial for him.

The Headmaster didn't look in Harry's direction, though, instead choosing to twinkle at the tables where the Durmstrang and the Beauxbatons students sat, and at the Gryffindor table.

"I would just like to remind everyone," he said, projecting his voice easily over the Hall, "that the Yule Ball is coming up in a few weeks—a tradition that Hogwarts has always followed whenever the Triwizard Tournament has been held here. Students will be invited to the Great Hall for a night of dancing and celebration." The smile on his face grew more pronounced. "The Ball is limited to students fourth year and up, unless younger students attend with an older partner. Dress robes are the required formal wear. Our Champions will lead the dancing. I suggest you find yourself partners soon, Mr. Krum, Miss Delacour, and Mr. Potter. Your various schools will be counting on you to make a good showing."

This isn't the Second Task, is it? Harry thought in panic for a moment, before relaxing and telling himself not to be stupid. He knew the schedule as well as anyone else. The Second Task wasn't until February. He told himself to get over his paranoia, and moved towards the doors from the Great Hall, ignoring the other students' excited buzz. He supposed that announcement hadn't been that awful, though for all he knew it could have unforeseen awful consequences. All the others had.

"Excellent," Blaise said in a tone of deep satisfaction.

Before Harry could ask him what he meant, Draco sniped, "Thinking about asking your little crush, Blaise?"

The other boy flushed slightly, but lifted his chin and said, "As a matter of fact, I think I will. I think it's more than you'll get up the courage to do, Draco, since you've just been going around moping and brooding and thinking yours will never talk to you." He turned and walked out of the Great Hall with a smart stride.

"You could just talk to your crush, you know," said Harry, grabbing Draco's arm so that he couldn't hex Blaise in the back. "I know you don't want to, that you're shy, but it's the only way this person will

ever know for certain that you like him or her.”

Draco turned on him so fast that Harry nearly sat down on the floor. “You don’t know,” Draco spat, his face turning an ugly, mottled red. “You’ll never get it, Harry Potter, not until it’s marching in enormous letters down the ceiling of the Great Hall.” He narrowed his eyes. “And I am not shy.”

“You’re certainly unreasonable about it,” said Harry, moving away from Draco. There was no dealing with him in these moods. “And Blaise will only keep teasing you about it until you do something to counteract the teasing.”

Draco just shook his head and brushed out of the Great Hall.

Millicent and Pansy were laughing as though they’d just heard the greatest joke in the world. Harry decided there was no chance to get sense out of them, either, and strode after Blaise and Draco.

“Ew,” said Millicent, fastidiously flicking slime from her shoe with a spell. The Forbidden Forest was easier to navigate in the light, Harry had to admit, but it wasn’t necessarily more pleasant.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” Harry said. His hold on the egg-shaped stone he’d found after a few hours’ searching was tight. He didn’t want to risk dropping it and then finding another. Besides, who knew what centaurs might have against dirt on the stone? Or perhaps they would insist that he bring only the first he found and no other.

He knew the centaurs were watching them. The odd snap of branches and the even odder hoofbeat said so. But they hadn’t approached them yet. Harry suspected they wouldn’t until he and Millicent reached the gallows clearing where he had saved Draco’s life.

He and Millicent reached a pleasant stretch of the path, and Harry let himself relax a bit. It was a pretty day, most uncommon for December, the sun beaming through a pearly sky that lent itself to illumination as easily as the more usual blue. The trees around them had lost most

of their leaves, but their trunks shimmered with splotches of gold from the light, and underneath their feet, the leaves talked and murmured as if they still hung on the branches. Harry felt a lively restlessness in the Forest. Most creatures were conducting their last business before the winter set in in earnest.

The solstice was coming in a few weeks. And then...then he would meet with Lucius Malfoy, and complete the final step in the truce-dance. Harry felt a quiet shiver of anticipation run through him, not unlike the emotions in the Forest's magical creatures. He thought he knew what Lucius would ask for, and he was alive with curiosity to see what he would receive himself.

Abruptly, the Many snake on his arm hissed so loudly that even Millicent glanced over. Harry stopped and drew back his sleeve, letting the little green-golden cobra see him. "What is it?" he asked, dropping into Parseltongue.

"Intruders," said the snake. "We can feel them. They are using the same spells that they used on us in our first home. They are searching for the hive, and when they find it, they will destroy it." The snake was vibrating with anger and anxiety. "How did they come here? Where are they from?"

Harry swore under his breath. He had promised that he would defend the Many from hunters, and he did not intend to go back on his promise. He turned and looked at Millicent, to make sure that he was speaking English. "Hunters," he whispered. "In the Forest, after the hive cobras."

Millicent's eyes widened, and then narrowed. "But the Forbidden Forest is off limits to hunters," she said. "Unless....oh, come on. That would just be stupid."

"What would be stupid?" Harry was listening now, trying to make out sounds that didn't belong to the Forest. It was useless. The Many's hive lay deeper in the woods, anyway. The hunters could be near it, and Harry wouldn't be able to hear them from this distance.

“Unless the Ministry allowed it,” Millicent said, sounding disgusted. “Unless they passed some special kind of edict that said hunting was allowed. They did once fifty years ago, when the Chamber of Secrets was last opened and the beast was rampaging around the school. They thought it might be lairing in the Forest, so they authorized hunters to destroy it on sight.”

Harry felt a brief shiver at the reminder of the Chamber—the memory he experienced when Dementors were near him—but he lost it in the rush of anger that followed. When he took a step forward, sloppy, new-formed ice broke under his foot. “Umbridge,” he breathed. “She would have the power to allow something like this, and I bet she remembered that I could speak to hives and cobras and had put them in the Forest. The Hounds could have told her. The bitch.”

“What are you going to do?” Millicent shook her wand into her hand and followed him, head cocked on one side as if she weren’t at all afraid. Harry supposed she might not be. His rage wasn’t directed at her.

“Defend the Many,” said Harry, but his mind was racing along another plan. His anger was greater than he had expected it to be. He understood it, though. Umbridge was only another minor thorn in his side. She aspired to become a major thorn, but he wasn’t about to let her. And he had a way to prevent it, too, a way to make her go away for good and all. “Deprive Umbridge of her job. Manipulate people. You know, the usual.”

Millicent laughed at his back, a sound full of dark promise. “Good,” she said. “I wondered what you were going to do for an encore to the dragons. Lead the way, Potter.”

Harry chose not to be bothered by her choice of words. He hissed at the Many, and they guided him and Millicent forward, towards the nest. Harry stroked the plan in his head, and hissed—a sound not part of Parseltongue—when he heard footsteps ahead.

You shouldn’t have bothered my allies, he thought. You simply shouldn’t have bothered my allies.

He crouched down, motioning Millicent to be still, and peered through the thick, tough fronds of some late-autumn plant in front of him. He could see two wizards, both fairly scrawny, dressed in robes that matched the browns and grays of the trees. They had their backs to him, and they were poised in front of the opening in the ground that Harry knew was the hive. They were debating something, softly, in voices too low for him to make out. One's wand sparkled the dark purple of a spell Harry didn't recognize.

"What are you going to do?" Millicent whispered.

Harry hissed softly to the Many in Parseltongue. The snake hissed back with enthusiasm, then slithered off his arm and dropped to the ground. It slid past the wizards without attacking, but called to its kin with their bond. Harry raised his eyebrows and waited.

The wizards' debate had ended. The one with the dark purple spell on his wand threw up his arms, as if agreeing that the other had the privilege of going first, and stepped back. The other came forward, turning slightly so that Harry could see his face. His eyes were narrow with determination, his head cocked slightly to the side, as if he could see down the nest by sheer force of will.

The Many exploded out of the den like a writhing flower.

Dozens of the tiny golden-green cobras raced straight for the wizards, who jumped back in sheer surprise. The nearest one raised his wand soon, though, and began to incant a spell that Harry suspected was meant to contain or destroy the snakes.

He cast a nonverbal, wandless Protego. He heard Millicent's breath catch sharply as his shield manifested above the cobras, throwing back the wizard's spell, though he wasn't sure why. With a wave of his hand, pleased that his magic stayed contained in his body, Harry expanded the Charm to cover the second slithering stream breaking off and attacking the other wizard.

This one didn't back down or seem as frightened as his companion had. He began steadily to chant, his face filled with disgust. Harry

suspected that that spell wouldn't be able to get through his Shield Charm, either, but he thought this was a good time to intervene.

He bolted from the bushes, hissing frantically and waving his own arms. What he was hissing was really, "As we agreed, so that these buffoons don't know what's going on," but it would sound like a command to the wizards, and probably to Millicent.

The Many coalesced back together with an audible rasping snap, which came from hundreds of scales brushing together. They turned to face him, many small heads spinning all at once. Harry felt their mind leap from body to body and coalesce in one particular one near the head of the formation.

Harry hissed again, "As we agreed."

The Many began to sway back and forth, as if they were actually charmed by his very presence. Harry caught his breath and knelt down, hands held out, voice hissing a steady stream of reassurances. The Many flowed forward, slowly, and then faster, and climbed his body.

Harry stood up, draped with the cobras as he had been that day in Knockturn Alley, and let their tongues caress his face. The body that contained the hive's mind at the moment curled around his neck and hovered near his eyes. Harry stared back at it, and admired the slanting sunlight through its hood. He was still afraid, but the fear was a distant thing. He no longer seriously worried that the Many meant him harm; he only knew they could, and that was enough to keep a serious respect for them at the forefront of his mind. Let one of them spit, and I would be blind for the rest of my life. No cure for that poison, Muggle or magical. Remember that, Harry.

He hissed, "Quiet now?"

Their flowing voices came back to him, saying only, "Yes," and then they all fell silent as one. The overall effect, Harry had to concede, was quite impressive.

He took a deep breath and lifted his eyes to the faces of the two wizards. The one who'd had the purple light on his wand still held it there, but he seemed utterly stunned and at a loss for what to say next. The other was nodding, his expression slightly more welcoming.

"You're Harry Potter," he said. "I read about you in the paper. Deadly creatures seem to like you." He made it a challenge.

Not so easy after all, then. Harry removed his plan in his mind, and blinked. "I'm sorry," he said, focusing hard on the hunters so that he wouldn't accidentally start speaking in the wrong language. "I just got so worried that they'd hurt you. It was the only way I could think of to save your lives." He smiled and shrugged slightly, a move that helpfully made the Many hiss at him. "I'm glad you're all right, though. I'll hold onto that thought as they kill me."

"What?" spluttered the wizard with the purple light on his wand. Harry was glad that Millicent had the good sense to stay silent and out of sight, though she must have been as stunned at his declaration as the rest of them.

"Oh, the Many demand a sacrifice from the Parselmouth who takes their prey from them." Harry blinked at them, making sure it seemed as though he thought everyone should have known that. "Last time, when I interrupted them in Knockturn Alley, they were content with my bringing them to the Forest and setting them free. But now they want to kill me. That's all right. I'm just glad that I saved your lives, after all." He closed his eyes and lifted his chin.

"Wait," said the wizard who'd accused him of being friendly with deadly creatures. "That isn't—we can't let you die to save us."

Harry opened his eyes again and gave him a small, brave smile. "Of course you can," he said. "You think it's a plot or something already. But I'd advise you to run again when they're done with me. I won't be alive to control them anymore, and they might decide that they're still hungry."

The wizard with the purple light on his wand straightened his spine. "I can't let you do this," he said quietly. "Harry Potter, my name is Tybalt

Starrise. Will you accept a life debt from me? You must be alive to accept and fulfill it.”

Harry blinked at him. Now that he looked, he could make out the family resemblance in this wizard’s face to the handsome man with bells in his hair whom he’d met at the Ministry on the autumnal equinox. Tybalt looked as though he disapproved of most everything in life, but there was honor written in the harsh lines about his mouth, and his blue gaze was clear and steady.

Harry made his voice mournful. “I don’t know how I can. After all, the Many want to kill me for interrupting their dinner.”

Tybalt shook his head. “I can’t let you do this,” he repeated. “Can you tell them that I’ll offer myself to them in your place?” His eyes were filled with trepidation now, but he didn’t look as though he would back away.

Trust a Light wizard to be honorable even unto death. Harry had been counting on that, actually, for his plan to work as it should. “I could ask,” he said. “But they really want to kill the Parselmouth who takes their prey from them, rather than just getting the prey back. Unless—” He caught his lip between his teeth and worried at it, as though he’d just had an idea.

“What?” Tybalt leaned forward, his face hopeful. The other wizard snorted, as though he were still trying to maintain a modicum of doubt, but his eyes were uncertain as they moved back and forth between his partner and Harry.

Harry hissed at the Many. “The next part is going to take some convincing,” he said. “Can all of you hiss at once? You don’t need to say anything, just hiss, and make it sound impressive.”

The Many did so. The sound welled up and around the clearing, and Harry could make out that it was composed of many distinct voices, which he usually couldn’t when they all spoke in concert. Tybalt’s partner took a step back. Tybalt himself remained still, eyes patiently fixed on Harry’s face.

“They want to feel safe,” Harry explained. “That’s why they’re angry enough to take my life. They were chased and harassed from their former home, and now they have eggs and a hive here. They might be able to let me go if I could promise they would stay safe.” He met Tybalt’s gaze. “That means that no hunters can come here ever again.”

The wizard behind Tybalt huffed. “That’s impossible. The Ministry authorized us to do this, but if we don’t do it, it’s just going to be someone else.”

“Sometimes, John, you’re an idiot,” said Tybalt, without taking his eyes from Harry. “I think he doesn’t just mean for us to leave and never come back. Isn’t that right, Lord Potter?”

“I am no Lord,” said Harry sharply, before he could stop himself. His magic flexed all around him like a beaten sheet of lead, briefly leaving his body. Tybalt blinked, then nodded.

“Your magic credits you with the title, but from your lips, I will believe the denial truth,” he said, the tone formal. “You mean for us to strike at the source. To get rid of the problem as soon as possible.”

“Yes.” Harry raised one eyebrow. I think I know him well enough now that this will work. “I have reason to believe that Madam Umbridge passed the new laws only as a means of getting back at me. She was there the day I was abducted and brought in for illegal questioning. She doesn’t like me, and she would have remembered that that was also the day I brought the Many home. She isn’t following the rule of law in authorizing you to hunt the Many, only her own grudges.”

Tybalt’s lip curled, and his eyes fired. Harry nodded, a shallow motion only the Many could see or feel. I thought so. He was probably a Gryffindor. He doesn’t approve of laws being used for dishonorable purposes.

“We can do something about that,” said Tybalt softly. “My uncle has been forbidden from political participation for a year, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us are helpless.” He glanced at the wizard behind

him. "Do you really think we can just go back and pretend we never heard this, John?"

The other wizard slowly shook his head. The suspicion had faded from his face at last, Harry saw, and forbade himself a sigh of relief. He'd done it. He'd convinced them, and, as Millicent had lectured him to do lately, he'd given part of the responsibility over to someone else. These men could work far more easily inside the Ministry than he himself could—even better, if the way Scrimgeour had operated in the past was a guide. Umbridge's days of pursuing her grievances through her new power were about to be numbered.

"Then, please," he said, "make sure that Madam Umbridge can't pass any more laws like this."

Tybalt nodded. He seemed almost abstracted. Harry was about to repeat his comment when Tybalt murmured, "My uncle has been near you, but I have not. He declined to speak of your power level when I asked him about it, murmuring something about it not being an appropriate subject to discuss around the average wizard, at least until you'd Declared for Dark or Light. But he did smile when the latest stories appeared. And now I see why. Will you forgive me for not properly introducing us? My name is Tybalt Starrise, elder son of Alba Starrise and her husband Tiberius Griffinsnest, nephew to Augustus Starrise." He bowed shallowly, and then drew John forward to stand beside him. "This sometimes ill-mannered wizard is my joined partner, John Smythe-Blyton."

John muttered something that sounded uncomplimentary, but bowed to Harry in return. He was Muggleborn, or so Harry knew he must be from his last name. His gaze on Harry was somewhere between awed and disbelieving.

"You hardly had time for proper introductions," said Harry, himself torn between curiosity and amusement. "Why now?"

"Because the magic I can feel around you is extraordinary," said Tybalt, and cocked his head and closed his eyes, as though basking in a fall of sunlight. "And it should not go unacknowledged. I do not know what my uncle was thinking, to engage in such stupidity as

forbidding himself politics so soon after he met you, but I wish to remedy that mistake. I will send you a formal letter of salutation in the future.”

“Do you want me to become a Light Lord?” Harry asked. He was a bit unnerved by what he could see in Tybalt’s face. Better to get the misconceptions out of the way now. “Because I should tell you that I’m unlikely to.”

“No,” Tybalt whispered. “It’s the magic that’s important. You don’t really understand, but why should you? You rest in the middle of it.” He opened his eyes and smiled at Harry. “I will contact you, unless there is some reason that you don’t wish me to.” He had a patient, listening expression, as though he would understand if Harry said no.

Harry frowned. Why am I suddenly acquiring allies on the Light side of the fence? He supposed he shouldn’t question his good fortune, but he did wonder at it. He had become resigned to the fact that no one Light was likely to ally with him when they found out how closely he consorted with Dark wizards, and especially when they learned he was a Parselmouth. “I won’t forbid you,” he said at last. “But your uncle may have been right to ignore your questions.”

“He was right not to talk about you,” said Tybalt. “Not right to cut himself off.” He bowed one more time to Harry. “We will do what we can against Madam Umbridge. Luckily for us, we do know some of her weak points. Legacy of my uncle’s close association with the old Minister.” He nodded as though that were all, and started to walk out of the clearing. John followed on his heels, giving Harry a final bewildered stare that said he was somewhat surprised by all this, but would follow what his partner decided was appropriate.

Harry shook his head, and turned towards the plants where Millicent had been hiding as the Many slithered down his body. “You can come out now,” he said.

Millicent moved forward. Her eyes were opaque, her mouth stretched in a faint smile.

“Are you angry?” Harry asked, since he couldn’t make out anything from her expression. “He is a Light wizard.”

“And you’re sworn to protect and spend time with my little sister, Harry,” said Millicent equitably. “No. Not angry. Just surprised, and then surprised at myself for being surprised. I should have seen how far your reach would extend.”

Harry rolled his eyes and waited only for one of the Many snakes to encircle his left arm before he turned to lead Millicent back in the direction of the gallows clearing. After what had taken place just now, he expected their meeting with the centaurs to be somewhat anticlimactic.

Harry leaned back against the couch and stretched. Overall, the day had gone well. The centaurs had watched his encounter with Tybalt and John, and hadn’t made much fuss about accepting Millicent as his delegated representative. It helped, he supposed, that Millicent hadn’t stared or acted as though the centaurs were the “halfbreeds” some pureblood wizards called them. That would certainly have started this relationship out on the wrong foot.

He shifted around so that he could more easily read the Parseltongue book, which was fairly heavy, and provoked an irritated sound from Draco. Harry grinned at his friend. Draco had been sitting on the floor beside the couch while he did his Astronomy homework, leaning back with his head near Harry’s leg. Harry appeared to have kicked him in the temple, accidentally, as he shifted positions.

“Sorry,” Harry said, knowing he didn’t sound it. “But you shouldn’t have put your head in the way of my foot.”

Draco scowled at him. Harry knew it wasn’t a serious scowl. In fact, a moment later it melted away, and left that same expression of pride and tenderness that Draco had looked at him with this morning. Harry raised his eyebrows. He wants to say something. I wonder what it is?

“Harry—“ Draco started.

“Oi! Potter!” Montague, one of the older students, called from near the door. “Someone’s here to see you!”

Harry blinked and put aside the Parseltongue book, which was sometimes fascinating, but more dry; it was a history of famous Parselmouths in the past, and appeared to concern itself mostly with who they’d married and how many children they had. His visitor must be someone from a different House, but he couldn’t imagine who it would be. No one had seemed especially anxious to talk to him at meals or in class today, when it would surely have been easier than trekking down to the dungeons and the Slytherin common room.

“Just a minute, Draco,” he murmured, and slipped towards the door. Draco didn’t listen, and followed him instead.

Luna Lovegood was standing in the corridor, her face patient and her expression abstracted as she stared at the ceiling. Harry smiled and felt himself relaxing. Of course she would come whenever she wanted to talk to me. I wonder what the stones are telling her?

“What is it, Luna?” he asked gently, so as not to startle her.

“The stones are telling me about the lake,” said Luna. “They’ve felt many fish swim past in their time, but no Nargles. How strange. Would you go to the Yule Ball with me, Harry?”

Harry blinked, disconcerted by her speech, and then blinked again as he realized what she’d asked him. He looked carefully at Luna, but her face was absolutely serene. Of course she wouldn’t play a joke like this on him—she wasn’t that kind of person, it would never occur to her—but someone else might have put her up to it.

“Are you sure you really want to go to the Ball with me?” he asked, to test it.

Luna nodded, her eyes far away. “Of course. Unless you already have someone who will escort you. Then I could simply come for the dancing.” She smiled mistily. “I like dancing.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. It wasn't as though anyone else would ask him, or was likely to. Besides, he didn't think he could trust many of the offers he might receive. The people who thought him—he grimaced—a hero wouldn't really be offering out of genuine liking for him, but just so they could bask in some sort of reflected glory. I hope Connor can find someone who really wants to dance with him, and not just a Champion. There was no doubt, though, that Luna meant it. "Then of course, Luna. I'd be honored."

Luna nodded to him, and turned and wandered up the hall. Harry watched her go, shaking his head. I wonder why she asked me? Maybe she knows that I'm one of the few people who will take her seriously.

He stepped back inside the common room, and turned around. "Draco, what were you going to s—"

He paused, finding Draco gone. He glanced in several directions, but didn't see Draco in the common room, and was just in time to hear a door slam. He sighed. My getting a date probably reminded him that he doesn't have one yet. Well, I'm sorry about that, but he should just ask this bloody crush of his, and then it wouldn't be a problem.

He moved back to his Parseltongue book. When he was halfway to the couch, Pansy exploded in laughter. Harry looked at her, and saw her sparkling eyes focused on him. She was hiding her mouth with her book, but she was definitely still laughing.

"What?" he asked.

"Draco is so funny," she said, by means of explanation, and then lay back on her divan and laughed her head off.

Harry sighed and picked up his book again. I do feel sorry for him, but he's got to get over that shyness. People will only keep teasing him until he does. And besides, his crush might reciprocate his feelings. I think he'd be happier then. He seems pretty damn serious about this.

Intermission: Two Conversations and a Reflection

“Well, I did it.”

Draco raised his head and glared over his shoulder at Blaise as he strolled into the fourth-year boys’ room. Blaise paused and chuckled at the sight of him, then took a seat on his own bed and watched Draco with a small smile.

On the silence went, and on, and on, until Draco ground his teeth and snapped, “What did you do?” He’d wanted to be left alone here in silence to brood over Harry, but as long as Blaise was going to intrude, he might as well have something interesting to say.

“I asked my crush to the Yule Ball.” Blaise examined one hand, as though trying to determine why he would ever had had any doubts on that score. It drove Draco mad. “And she said yes.” He looked up and winked at Draco. “So at least one of us is going with the date he wanted to go with.”

Draco threw his pillow at his head. Blaise went down beneath it, laughing, and sat up a moment later to throw it back. Draco hadn’t been prepared. He grunted as it caught him in the face.

“Honestly,” Blaise said, when Draco had clawed the cloth away from his face and could see again. Draco could feel his emotions, since Harry wasn’t in the room to provide a buffer or a shield, and they were all cool, focused around cold glee and something that might almost have been pity. “You’re making yourself agitated with not talking to him. And it’s affecting other people now, too—including him, and I think we’d all agree that an angry Harry is something we’d prefer to avoid. I wish you’d do us all a favor and just ask him to the stupid Ball.”

“He already has a date,” said Draco. The words stung his mouth as though he were spitting bees. “He didn’t want to go with me.”

Blaise growled, and his emotions turned hot. “You didn’t ask him, you prat! He can’t very well read your mind and know that you want to go with him if you don’t ask, can he?”

"The rest of you do well enough." Draco rolled back over and shut his eyes. He didn't want to hear, yet again, the note of pleasure in Harry's voice as he accepted Loony's invitation. It was plain enough that Harry really wanted to go with the crazy girl. He didn't seem to care that she was only a friend he sometimes talked with, rather than the person who'd been beside him since the day he was Sorted into Slytherin. "I don't know why he can't see it."

"Maybe because he's messed in the head?" Blaise asked. "Quite literally."

Draco sat up again. The note of scorn in Blaise's voice would have prompted that even if he'd said something nicer. "Shut up," he whispered, and the note in his own voice made Blaise pale, a bit. "You know nothing about what he went through."

"Not the specifics." Blaise lifted his chin. "But we can see the mark it left on his behavior, Draco, and yes, he is messed in the head. Not in the way his date is, I'll grant you that, but in a different way. And you claim to know more about that than any of us do. And yet you're still sitting here, waiting for Harry to act like a normal person. I think you're going to have a long wait." He abruptly shook his head and snorted. "And what the hell am I doing giving you romantic advice? It's not like you were a great fount of it with my date." He stood and made for the door of the room.

"I told you to stop drawing lions on your homework!" Draco yelled at his back, because he couldn't let that pass without some kind of insult. "She is a Gryffindor, isn't she?"

"None of your damn business until you see her on my arm at the Yule Ball," Blaise said over his shoulder. "Where, and I remind you of this, Harry will be dancing with Loony."

He shut the door before Draco managed to hit him yet again with the thrown pillow.

"It's no use," said Ron, and fell into one of the desks, panting. Harry saw it tilt dangerously and quickly performed a charm that would keep it upright. There was a reason that these classrooms had been

abandoned, and filled with this kind of furniture. Ron, mopping sweat from his forehead with one hand, and then shifting his grip on his wand as that, too, became slimy, didn't notice. He blinked forlornly at Harry. "I'm never going to get it right."

"Sure you are." Harry kept his voice pitched low and soothing. He wouldn't get irritated with Ron. He'd spent the last few days in a haze of irritation, what with Draco being an impossible git prone to insulting everyone in sight and the pressure of Snape's approaching trial date. If he concentrated, it was actually easy to pour out his irritation into something like this—an action where he thought he could make a substantial advance. He liked doing things, accomplishing things, and today he was going to break the block on Ron's magic. "That's why I picked this spell to practice. I know that you can perform it more easily than most wizards can. Your family's been Light for at least a few generations. You can manage this."

Ron shook his head. "You don't understand," he said, with a leaden disquiet in his voice that Harry knew came from years of failure. "I've tried for a long time, and I can't break this block. I can't do it now."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He'd been trying to coax Ron up to a certain level of power before he tried what he thought would actually shatter the block, but perhaps he should try the shattering process first. "Right," he drawled. "I suppose I should have known better." He turned as if he would walk out of the classroom. Though it was the usual place where he held his lessons for the other students, it was empty now except for him and Ron.

Footsteps pounded on the floor, and then Ron's hand grabbed his shoulder. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

Harry glanced over his shoulder at him. Ron's freckles were standing out sharply on his pale face. Harry snorted. "Just that I should have known that you weren't really a Gryffindor," he said distantly. "A Gryffindor would keep right on going. Gryffindors don't give up. I thought you sat under the Sorting Hat for a long time. You should have been Hufflepuff, right?"

“I should not have!” Ron yelled, and his face flushed. “I’m a Gryffindor through and through! My family’s always been! You take that back!”

“Why should I?” Harry wrenched his shoulder free with a motion that, though easy enough in itself, looked as if it took a lot more effort than it did. He stepped back and snorted at Ron. “You’re not proving it. You might have argued the Sorting Hat into putting you in Godric’s House, but when it comes to the test, you back off!”

“I do not!”

Harry gazed straight into Ron’s eyes as he watched him get angrier and angrier. He made sure not to smile when he saw the block quaking. That would defeat his purpose. “Then show me,” he sniffed. “Perform this spell, and I’ll believe it. But otherwise, I think I should go to Headmaster Dumbledore and tell him that you didn’t really deserve to be—“

“I can so do it!” Ron whipped around, drawing his wand outward. “Aurora Speculae!”

Harry felt Ron’s magic rise up, roaring, foam for a moment like a wave at the block, and then splinter and sweep it aside. He had to shield his eyes as golden light filled the room, beaming from the end of Ron’s room and inundating the walls. Magic came with it, roaring still, happy, and Harry felt the corresponding tug and lift in his heart that the spell was supposed to cause.

The light went on shining for a time. It was the Sunrise of Hope spell, meant to signal a leader’s position to his troops on a battlefield and give them the continued strength to go on. Light Lords often used it to start a battle, too, with the invocation, “And so shines the Light against the Dark!”

Ron didn’t make the cry, but Harry hadn’t expected him to. When the light finally finished shining, he lowered his arm, and found Ron blinking. Part of that was surely afterimages, but another part was shock, expressed in his whispered words a moment later. “My block is gone.”

Harry smiled at him. "When you told me about how it was created, when you were so angry, I thought rage was probably the key to breaking it." He shrugged lightly. "And it was."

Ron blinked at him some more, then said, "You prat. You did that on purpose!"

"Of course I did." Harry felt weightless, pleased, happy, ready even to go back to the Slytherin common room and face Draco sulking over his crush whom he wouldn't talk to. "I know you're a Gryffindor, Ron. It's pretty damn obvious all the damn time," he added, and walked towards the door.

He had to duck a spell aimed at his back—Ron was honorable, but he wasn't stupid—and spun around with a hex ready on his lips. They duelled for a short time. Ron's spells had a speed and power that Harry knew they'd never had, and Ron's face had a look of dazed happiness that wasn't common, either.

Harry finished the duel laughing. There was nothing else that made him so happy as helping people.

Albus settled back in his chair with a little sigh and looked out the window of his office. The first snowfall of December was sifting down, turning the sky and the grounds to one haze of white. Students trudged about in scarves and thick coats, when they ventured outside at all—except for the Durmstrang students, who went out in shirt sleeves, had snowball fights with each other, and laughed whenever someone else complained about the cold.

I do not know what I am going to do.

His project to test Harry, Albus had to admit, was not going well. He had tried to push Harry along two parallel tracks. One was to keep hidden, to stay further in the shadows, to make him used to the adulation going to other people. Harry's deep embarrassment when he did do something to attract attention should have made that one easy. Albus had felt confident enough in that scheme's success to take him to the Ministry during Fudge's hearing. The Wizengamot

was sure to notice his power, but more than that, they would see how he sat behind Albus, and they would know who controlled him.

And then Scrimgeour had hauled Harry into the spotlight, and Griselda Marchbanks herself appeared to have taken notice of him.

Albus shook his head slowly. Bad as that had been, it was nothing compared to the fiasco of the First Task. Of course he was glad that the students had not been hurt, but did Harry have to save everyone in so noticeable a way? Dozens of photographs had shown up, snapped by the press ostensibly there to report on the First Task, of Harry looping on his broom around the dragons, staring into the dragons' eyes, protecting the Ravenclaw students with a Shield Charm that obviously came from him...

No, that part was not going well.

That meant the second part of the plan must pick up momentum. For a time, Albus considered, it had been more successful than the other. Harry had been busy, had been dashing about and trying to exhaust himself with taking care of everything, had come near the edge of emotional breakdown from the moment Connor's name emerged from the Goblet. He had nearly entered the state of mind where Albus believed he would be amenable to a few gentle suggestions that the Headmaster might make. For all his brilliance when he was thinking clearly, Harry tended to run headlong into traps when his emotions took control; it was the Gryffindor in him. Just one noose around his neck, just one offer of a comfortable place when he was breaking down, and Albus believed that he would have secured Harry's power from any unfortunate uses it might be turned to.

And then the Slytherins had intervened.

It had not escaped Albus's attention how closely his yearmates had stuck around Harry since the day of his mother's last letter. They spoke with him more often, and didn't let him withdraw into an isolated shell. And Harry, irritating miracle of miracles, responded to them more often than not, and thrived on the trust they seemed to offer him. It was astonishing.

It was not at all what Albus had planned.

Albus half-closed his eyes and sighed. He hated having to make decisions like this, but if he did not make them, then no one would. And Harry needed some decision, some direction, some guide. If he had Declared for Dark or Light, Albus would not feel the need to interfere like this. But as it was, Harry appeared to understand almost nothing of how the world worked, and that other wizards simply could not cope with having a fourteen-year-old powerhouse running loose. Even his alliances with the Dark pureblood families, which Albus might have counted a restraining influence otherwise, were not enough, because they appeared content to leave leadership up to Harry. Albus could not imagine what wizards like Lucius Malfoy got out of that, other than a laugh at Harry's (and probably Albus's) expense, but there it was.

There was Severus's trial coming up on the solstice, where Harry would be expected to testify, but the emotional exhaustion that put him through would be made up for his guardian's reemergence into school life, since Albus fully expected the Wizengamot to exonerate Severus.

That meant...

Hm. Yes. Well, that might work.

Albus sighed again and opened his eyes. It will have to. Matters cannot go on as they have been. And I will send him warning. On his head be it if he chooses to ignore the warning.

Chapter Thirty-Five: A Deep and Tangled Tale

Harry dreamed.

“Evan.” Voldemort’s voice was unmistakable by now, and Harry didn’t feel as though he’d just been hearing it in his dreams. It seemed as though it ran all through his life, threading through his dreams and binding them to his visions and his pain and his training, binding his whole existence to the night when the Dark Lord had come to Godric’s Hollow and changed things for him and Connor.

“My lord.” Evan Rosier dipped his head and sat down on the floor in front of Voldemort. They were in an ancient house, Harry knew that much, with a fire burning in a hearth and throwing back muffled shadows from a dusty mantle and fire irons. Voldemort sat in a high-backed chair, facing the fire, so that Harry still couldn’t see him. That was all right. He didn’t want to see him, not really. Nagini lay sleeping on the floor beside his chair. “I have been to the giants. They did not seem interested in what I had to say. They did not even appear to recognize the name of vates. They merely stared and grunted, until I spoke in their own language. Then they roared and chased me away.”

“You have failed me, then, Evan?” Voldemort did not sound pleased.

“Yes, my lord.” Rosier did not sound overly concerned. Harry flattened himself to the floor, grateful he was in the smaller furry shape—whatever it was—that would permit him to do that, as he heard footsteps pounding up a hall behind him. He thought he could feel a swirl of robes as Bellatrix slipped past him and into the room.

“My lord?” she asked, her voice trembling with excitement. It was a girlish voice, Harry thought. Like Umbridge’s. “You called for me?”

“Evan does not take his duties seriously even now,” Voldemort hissed. “Punish him for me!”

“Yes, do punish me, Bellatrix.” Rosier winked at her. “But use something other than Crucio this time, would you? I’m getting awfully tired of it.” He lay down on the floor. “Here, I’ll even put myself in a

convulsive posture first, so that you can have the satisfaction of seeing me like that. Maybe then you'll use something else." He twisted his head to the side, crossed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue.

Voldemort made an indescribable noise of anger, and Nagini swayed back and forth, echoing her master with a hiss that Harry recognized as the closest a snake could come to a curse. Harry shivered for a moment, and wondered why in the world Voldemort put up with Rosier.

Because he has no one else, he thought abruptly. If Bellatrix and Rosier are the only two Death Eaters attending him for some reason, then he doesn't have much choice about not killing them.

Bellatrix, predictably, chose to put Rosier under the Cruciatus Curse. As he had before, Rosier laughed throughout it, and Bellatrix lifted the Curse on orders from the Dark Lord, in disgust. Her right wrist was folded in her sleeve this time, and Harry could not see what it might look like.

"Very well, Evan," said Voldemort, when Rosier's laughter had faded and he lay there, looking up at his Lord with a smile. "Then you will assist me in another endeavor. We are attempting to compile a list of traitors to our cause, the cowards and crawling worms who have turned their backs on me."

"Well, Severus, of course," said Rosier at once. "He attacked us in May when we tried to follow Rodolphus onto Hogwarts grounds."

Harry felt something twitch in his paw, and looked down to see that claws had shot out of it, as though he were about to scratch someone's face off in defense of Snape. Voldemort only made that sound of anger again, and said, "Yes, Bellatrix had informed me of him. Who else?"

"Hawthorn Parkinson," said Rosier. "She refused to assist us in the process of your most glorious return last year, and Fenrir Greyback bit her. For all that, I do not believe she has changed her allegiance

back to us. In fact, I have uncovered evidence that she follows the Potter boy.”

“It will not go well with her, should we meet again,” Voldemort murmured. “Who else?”

“Adalrico Bulstrode, my lord,” Bellatrix broke in, sounding as if she resented being ignored. “Walden told me that he came to the Ministry the day that Potter was abducted. It seems likely that he was attending that meeting rumored to take place in the Head Auror’s office.”

Voldemort was silent a moment. Harry waited to hear him swear vengeance against Adalrico, but he said only, “And Wormtail?”

“We do not know, my lord,” Bellatrix said respectfully. “He broke out of Azkaban last year, and there were rumors that he intended to go after the Potter boy. He even sneaked onto Hogwarts grounds. But we do not know where he is now.”

“I would win him back, if we can,” said Voldemort. “Send word abroad. We will find him.” A longer pause, this time, and Harry waited and worried. At least I was able to hear this. “And Lucius?” Voldemort asked at last, and Harry felt fur lift, bristling, all along his spine.

“Another unknown, my lord,” said Rosier. His voice sounded more even now, balanced, but also bored. “You said that he had obeyed Sirius Black’s command to retrieve a Dark artifact three years ago, but past that, we know nothing of his actions in favor of your cause. Greyback and Macnair said that they did not believe he was loyal any longer, but Macnair has always been jealous of Lucius, and Greyback is—not stable. He appears simply to be watching and waiting, rather than committing himself to one side or another. He attended the meeting in the Ministry the day Potter was abducted, but that could have been to please his wife and son, who are Potter’s known allies.”

“Waiting and watching would be like Lucius,” said Voldemort. “Before I lost contact with Sirius Black’s mind last year, I know that he was dithering, most unacceptably.” Another pause, and then he said, his voice decisive, “Lucius must not allow family loyalties to stand in the

way of his commitments. Evan. Go to him, tonight, and question him about the Dark artifact that he retrieved for me. I would know what became of it.”

The diary, Harry thought, feeling his scar burn in brief, hot pulses. They’re talking about the diary. They must be.

“And if he can give no satisfactory account of it?” Rosier asked, his voice soft and eager.

“End him,” said Voldemort. “I give this kill to you, my faithful servant.”

Rosier bowed, stood, and strode from the room, his hands almost twitching. Harry tried to follow him, but found the hall running out in front of him and darkening as he traveled further from Voldemort’s chair. Apparently his dream centered on the Dark Lord, and he could not move much away from him. He swung back around, reluctant to wait, but wondering if he would hear anything else useful.

“Why did you want a final accounting of the traitors, my lord?” Bellatrix whispered, kneeling beside his chair. “I thought you had known already who was loyal to you and who was not.”

“I would have my known enemies marked, Bella, and those who might be persuaded back to my side left alone for now,” said Voldemort. “We must wait. The sun is rising.”

They both started laughing, and Nagini swayed back and forth, and Harry conceded that he was going to learn nothing else useful. He turned and sprang up towards the surface of the dream, clawing it down, forcing himself to wake up.

I have to open my eyes. This is only a vision, but Rosier is moving outside it, going to Malfoy Manor. He may have Apparated there already. Wake up!

Harry opened his eyes, gasping, and then had to blink hard as blood cascaded down from his forehead and blinded him for a moment. He wiped it away, and heard the Many snake on his arm hiss, partly in excitement at the nearness of the blood and partly in concern.

Harry tumbled out of bed, caught his foot in the hem of the skirt, and tripped. He heard sleepy grumbles from Blaise and Vince, but he couldn't pause to either reassure them or cast a sleeping charm on them. His whole attention was fixed on the bed beside his, and Draco lying under the covers.

He drove himself to his feet again, tugged the curtains open, and hissed, "Draco!"

His friend stirred and rolled over to him, slowly blinking his eyes open. The half-smile on his lips melted when he saw who it was. He'd been intolerable the past few days, since Harry had agreed to go with Luna to the Yule Ball.

At the moment, Harry didn't care. This was more important than whoever Draco's crush might be or might not be.

"Get up!" he said. "I need you to firecall your parents, right now! Or—" Another idea abruptly came to him. "If you're sure that serpent you gave me will work as a Portkey for both of us, we'll take that. Evan Rosier is on his way to question your father about Tom Riddle's diary."

He didn't know how much of that Draco had actually understood, but he was scrambling out of bed, reaching for the set of school robes he'd draped on his trunk for the next day, and that was all Harry wanted from him. He hurried back to his own trunk and shrugged on his robes over his pyjamas. Blaise poked his head out of his curtains.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, irritation and weariness roughening his voice. "Some people need to sleep, you know!"

"We're going somewhere," Harry snapped, even as he opened his trunk and searched for the glass snake that Draco had given him for his birthday last summer, the one that showed Draco's emotions for him and would also act as an emergency Portkey to Malfoy Manor. Harry hadn't used it for a long time. He didn't know why he needed to, when Draco himself had told Harry that he loved him like a friend. So

long as Draco said what he was feeling, Harry didn't require any extra reassurance. "None of your damn business."

Blaise laughed.

Harry shook his head and found the serpent, snatching it up. He snorted when he saw it roiling with purple and red—anger and protectiveness, no surprise. Draco had been feeling a mixture of both of them for him lately. He turned, his arm already extended, and Draco clasped his wrist with one hand and the serpent with the other.

"Portus," Harry whispered.

He felt the magic surge forward and claim them, and heard Blaise's startled shout, in the moment before they vanished. Harry gritted his teeth and held on tight to the serpent and Draco both as the world around them danced with mad, dizzying colors. He hated traveling by Portkey. It never seemed to end, and in this case, with the great distance between Hogwarts and Malfoy Manor, it seemed to take an especially long time.

He and Draco sprawled together in a sheltered anteroom that Harry vaguely recognized as the place where Draco seemed to firecall his parents. Harry rolled over and climbed to his feet.

He frowned when he noticed the serpent was now shining blue. That was a color he had never seen before, and he didn't know what it meant. I hope using it as a Portkey didn't damage it.

"My parents should be here soon," said Draco, wiping at a bit of dust on his robes. "They'll have felt us come through the wards."

"We are already here," said Lucius's cold voice from near the door. "Why are you here, Draco? Potter," he added, when Harry turned and met his eyes.

Harry nodded tensely back to him. Lucius was his ally, of course that was true, but his dream tonight had also reminded him that Lucius was the one responsible for his mind getting torn to shreds in his

second year, his possession by Voldemort, the death of Syllarana, and the emergence of the phoenix web.

But even that had had good consequences, so that Harry could not blame him as much as he would have liked.

And Draco would be devastated if he died, which was the main reason that Harry had brought them here.

“Sir,” he said, “Evan Rosier is coming to the Manor. Voldemort sent him, to see what you did with the diary that you retrieved for him.” He paused, thinking rapidly back to the first time he’d met Lucius in the dance. They’d sat and talked until Draco interrupted, and, yes, an owl bearing a message had come to the window. Harry thought now that the message must have been from Sirius, writing in order to relieve the pain in his mind. “That was in the letter you got during my first Christmas here, wasn’t it, sir?”

Lucius’s lips pinched shut, but he only nodded. “Why is the Dark Lord sending Rosier?” he asked softly. “Evan and I were never close. He could not think that I would believe whatever lie he intends to tell me.”

Harry let out a low breath and fixed his eyes on Lucius’s face. It was made somewhat easier by the fact that Narcissa, wearing night-robcs, had come up behind her husband, her face watchful. “Voldemort already suspects that you aren’t loyal to him. Rosier has orders to kill you if you can’t answer his questions satisfactorily.”

There was a long pause. Then Lucius bared his teeth and said, “I am disinclined to let him do that.”

Harry nodded. “I came here because I wasn’t sure what he might do, and because it is, after all, partly my fault that you’re in danger.”

“Might I ask, Harry,” said Narcissa, her voice cool and slim as a dagger, “how you learned this information?”

Harry could almost feel Draco smirking off to the side. Well, no way to deny this now.

He sighed and lifted his fringe away from his forehead, so they could see his scar. "This connects me to Voldemort," he said quietly. "It has since the night of the attack on Godric's Hollow. I've had dreams about him and his plans since I came to Hogwarts, but lately they've sharpened. I think my connection to him is growing stronger. I had a vision tonight that warned me Rosier was coming. Voldemort suspects Mrs. Parkinson, Professor Snape, and Mr. Bulstrode of having betrayed him, too."

Narcissa simply blinked at him. Lucius, on the other hand, had turned pale.

"The Dark Lord could do that," he whispered.

"What?" Harry asked, hoping that he sounded ignorant and not shocked.

"The Dark Lord sometimes received—visions, dreams that might have been prophetic." Lucius shook his head, his eyes never leaving Harry's face. "He ascribed it to being a Legilimens, however, someone who had trained his mind so well that he might catch glimpses of the future from reading the likely course of other people's thoughts. You cannot have developed your own skill so far. What are you?"

It says something about how frightened he must be, to have asked that. Harry shook his head. "The explanation is long and convoluted, and we don't have time for it right now. Rosier—"

An owl flew into the room before he could finish, a large bird bearing straight for Lucius. Lucius raised a hand and steadied the creature with a frown. The owl flopped its wings weakly, urgently, as Lucius took the letter from its leg.

Harry stiffened, remembering the spell that Rosier had used to send an owl through Lux Aeterna's wards.

"Don't open the letter—" he started.

Something inside the envelope, or else the letter itself, must have been a Portkey. Lucius vanished with a pop, and the dying owl fell to the floor.

Narcissa closed her eyes at once. "I can still feel him, somewhat," she said. "He's outside the wards. Furious, but alive. The wards would have let me know if he'd died."

"Rosier must have pulled him there so he could have a little private discussion with him," said Harry. He took a long step forward, and grabbed the letter, which Lucius had let drop to the floor.

"Harry!" he heard from a combined shout of two voices, Draco and Narcissa.

Harry ignored them both. He had to get to where Lucius and Rosier were, that much was obvious, and he didn't think that sitting around in the antechamber and twiddling his thumbs would help matters.

This time, the dizzying pull and the maddening colored journey were short. He rolled to his feet in a little dip of ground that he recognized vaguely as being part of the empty land around Malfoy Manor. Now, it was naked, and glittered with snow in the light of the moon.

And it was dangerous. Lucius and Rosier were already dueling.

Harry lost his own breath for a moment, caught up in the sight. The wizards involved were both Dark, and so there was none of the holding back that there might have been in a Light duel. Rosier was throwing hexes and curses meant to wound and torture, and Lucius was responding with ones that would kill Rosier if they touched him. Both used defensive spells that, like the one Draco had employed on the stands during the day of the First Task, were meant to drive back an enemy, and not just block his attacks. The light of the many contrasting spells slamming into each other and canceling each other out showed the hatred carved on Lucius's face and the amusement on Rosier's, and their flying hair and bodies made shadows on the snow.

Then Harry shook his head and decided that he'd spent enough time watching. "Protego!" he declared, and the air in front of Lucius firmed and hardened into a glittering wall. Lucius stopped firing hexes at once, but Rosier had already tossed one off. The Shield Charm reflected it back at him, and Rosier hissed as it slashed a long line down his leg.

Harry forced himself to stop thinking that the hex would have hit the femoral artery if it had struck Rosier just a little higher, and then he'd be bleeding to death. He stalked forward instead, and let his magic escape his body a bit, clapping its wings. "You might as well face me, Rosier," he told the Death Eater. "Since you've been so eager to all those other times."

Rosier laughed, his face reflecting a lean and hungry joy. "Oh, Harry, Harry, I hoped you would come," he said. "You couldn't leave your ally to suffer, could you? Of course not." He moved forward, his face a mask of pleasure now, his eyes never letting Harry's go.

"One thing you aren't," he whispered, "is boring."

Harry did his best not to react to those words. He didn't really think anyone would suspect that his visions of Voldemort existed unless he told them, but Rosier was crazy and paranoid enough to suspect anyway, and perhaps wild enough to guess until he got it right.

"You could always give it up, you know," Harry told him, as he backed into a circle, and lured Rosier into it with him. "Just turn yourself into the Aurors and accept the inevitable. The Dementors are gone from Azkaban, and you can't run forever. The Black estates are closed to you now."

"You don't really understand," Rosier murmured. "Such a heart, Harry. There was a poet once, another of those who called himself a Muggle, though magical blood had descended into him through his mother. He drowned. Such a sad story. But they burned him on the beach where he washed up, and the one thing that did not burn, the one thing that his magic preserved, was his heart. Can you imagine, Harry? The flames die, and in the middle of it all is this heart, no longer beating, of course, but still present and whole. Can you imagine what they

must have felt, those Muggles? Do you think they knew they were in the presence of magic?"

Harry performed a nonverbal Blasting Curse. Rosier dismissed it with a nonverbal spell of his own. Harry wasn't even sure which one he'd used to counter it. He narrowed his eyes. That's what not learning the Dark Arts before this does to me. I don't know how my enemies defend themselves.

"The One remains, the many change and pass," said Rosier, his voice soft. "Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly; life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass, stains the white radiance of Eternity." He smiled at Harry, and cocked his head to the side as Harry tried a spell that would cause unconsciousness, and his shields bounced it. "Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die, if thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!"

His wand flicked, once. "Cor cordium flammae!"

Harry felt the flame start in the center of his chest this time, a burning, many-colored thing, and then expand, as if it would chew away at the lining of his muscles and throat. It hurt. It was not a quick pain this time, not like the Blood-Burning Curse, but a slow one that would take hours, and torture him exquisitely.

And, once again, it had got inside his shields.

Harry narrowed his eyes and forced himself to concentrate on Rosier, who was watching him in fascination. He did not know the countercurse for this spell, but, more importantly, he thought that Rosier might get bored of watching him suffer any moment and turn back to Lucius. He had to make sure he left.

He focused all his will and his magic on the single goal of getting Rosier to leave. He didn't know what spell to use for it, so he didn't try to convey his intentions in the framework of an incantation. He just concentrated instead, pouring all of himself into this one goal.

Rosier blinked, and looked astonished in the moment before he vanished with a pop, slingshotted back to Voldemort. A spray of blood from his torn leg plumed outward and fell onto the snow.

Harry felt his magic roar away from him, and called it forcibly back again even as he sagged to his knees. The curse was still spreading outward from his heart. He forced himself to breathe deeply, evenly, and concentrated, this time, on stopping the anguish.

It would not end. The fire went right on crawling, and even grew stronger, as though everything Harry flung at it was so much oil or air to feed it. Harry dragged out a breath full of panic and pain, and went at it again. Perhaps he just wasn't focused enough, because it hurt so much.

"Finite Incantatem," said Lucius from above him, and the burning sensation in his heart stopped growing. "You can't do that yourself," he added, as he knelt down beside Harry. "The Burning Heart Curse is simple to end, but the victim is the one person who can't affect it."

"Stupid for him to use it, then," Harry forced out between gritted teeth. The pain was as slow to fade as it had been to expand. Harry kept one hand clasped on his chest, and hoped, fervently, that if he ever did die of a heart attack, that it was a quick one. "Since I had someone else with me."

"It is traditionally used in situations where the victim would be—largely bereft of such help," said Lucius, and then held out a hand. "You can stand, I hope, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded, and jerked himself to his feet, using only the lightest grasp on Lucius's wrist. He looked up, and met a pair of eyes several times cooler than Draco's, though no less curious about him.

"I think," said Lucius, slowly, judiciously, "that you should come back to the Manor and tell us how you learned Rosier was coming, and why you have the link that you do to the Dark Lord, and other things that I have wondered about."

Harry couldn't see a way to escape it, so he simply nodded, and followed Lucius back over the snow-covered clearing to the start of the wards.

Lucius watched Harry Potter with a gaze that he knew would not unnerve the boy—that was not his purpose—but would conceal his own emotions. If it did that, then he would account this a victory.

It had been a very strange night.

Narcissa had sensed them the moment they were back inside the wards, of course, and come out to meet them. Draco had been behind her, but only for a short distance. Then he'd come flying out, and Potter had received a truly astonishing amount of yelling. Draco had been genuinely angry, Lucius knew. He'd even started to utter obscenities, at least until he remembered that his parents were watching him and nearly swallowed his tongue. He'd bowed his head, and all but shoved Potter into the house, where he insisted on hearing the account of the battle, and criticizing Potter, and talking about what he would have done better had he been along.

Potter just bore it all, his head tilting towards Draco every few seconds, when it wasn't bent over the mug of hot chocolate that Narcissa had had the house elves make for him.

They were gathered in the antechamber where the boys had first landed now: Potter and Draco on a divan, he and Narcissa on another. Lucius watched, while his wife asked the questions. Potter trusted her more. He would reveal more to her.

He was, oddly, gratified to see that Narcissa had been right about what would bind his son together with the Potter boy in a short time. His wife had always been more perceptive about that kind of thing; she'd been the one to predict all the marriages and joinings among their set when they were just engaged themselves.

At least Potter has honor, and loyalty. And the magic!

The magic, Lucius had to admit, was the main reason he had even considered being the boy's ally.

Narcissa asked first, "How did you know that the Dark Lord was sending Rosier after my husband, Harry?" Her hand wandered sideways to him. Lucius clasped it. They didn't often demonstrate their affection for each other, and they often argued, but that didn't matter. Theirs was simply a relationship of the strong to the strong, and it was how they had always functioned.

"A vision, as I told you," Potter said. "I've had dreams like this for years now, but they've sharpened and clarified and homed in on Vol—"

"Do not say the name," Lucius interposed.

Draco glared at him, but Potter only glanced, and then nodded. "The Dark Lord," he said. "He's been their focus since this summer. He's returned to Britain, and Bellatrix and Rosier have been with him, though he sent Rosier off to negotiate with the giants for a time. I don't know where the other Death Eaters are."

"And you never saw fit to inform us of this?" Narcissa's voice had dropped several degrees.

"I couldn't, without revealing how I got the information," Potter responded equitably. "And I didn't want to do that."

Narcissa sat in silence for a time. Lucius watched his son again. Draco looked rather the way Lucius himself had when he caught Narcissa playing a dangerous game with her sister in their seventh year, a game that could have ended with her disfigured, Transfigured, or dead. Plainly, he thought Potter should have been talking about the dreams much earlier.

Yes, he should have, Lucius thought. And why didn't he? My darling will ask that, of course.

And Narcissa did. "Why, Harry?" she asked. "Why didn't you inform anyone of this? It counts as danger, and we are your allies. We would have protected you, as you have striven to protect us."

Potter's chin briefly rose. "I have—grown used to considering myself independent," he said. "Partly it was my training, you know."

Lucius half-lidded his eyes. He had glimpsed some of Potter's memories the first Christmas the boy visited the Manor, nearly three years ago now. They had indeed shown an extensive education and training, but he wondered that the Potters should have taught their elder son all about pureblood dances and yet failed to instill in him a sense of connection to the allies he would make using them.

There is something there that he is not mentioning.

"And partly, I thought that you would think I was the same as the Dark Lord, or a plaything of his, having this connection to him," Potter added.

Narcissa leaned forward. "What are you to him, Harry?"

Potter's body stiffened. Draco laid a hand on his shoulder. Potter glanced aside to Draco, and he gave a tiny nod.

Potter blew out his breath and looked at Narcissa. "Someone whom I trust very much said that with the attack on Godric's Hollow, I became the Dark Lord's magical heir," he said. He touched his forehead again and brushed the fringe away, revealing the lightning bolt scar. "He cast the Killing Curse at me, and gave me this. He transferred powers that he didn't mean to transfer, too, like Parseltongue. It's not complete, but that's part of the connection between us."

And he might have inherited the Dark Lord's ability to dream prophetically, too, Lucius surmised. Or perhaps, since the dreams concern only the Dark Lord's doings, it is a result of the connection of the curse scar.

Those were the thoughts on the surface of his mind. Underneath ran a quick, fiery exaltation that he was reluctant to define even to himself.

Well, most of it, at least. He knew that some of it focused around the words the Dark Lord's magical heir, and the impulse to laugh at how wrong both of them had been, the Dark Lord and the old fool, and so

many others, who had thought that they understood what had happened that night at Godric's Hollow.

He could see the future, now. It was much more full of his own laughter than he had ever thought it could be.

Narcissa broke the deep silence that Lucius only then realized had engulfed both of them. "So you are the Boy-Who-Lived, then, Harry?"

Lucius returned abruptly to the present.

Potter closed his eyes tightly. His fingers were twined in Draco's, the cup of hot chocolate sitting alone on his knee. A house elf appeared without a sound, took the mug, and left again. Potter didn't appear to notice.

He let out a long, soft breath. "In a manner of speaking," he said, opening his eyes and focusing on Narcissa.

Lucius sincerely thanked whatever fates had planned for Potter and Narcissa to be looking at each other, and his son to be looking at Potter. He was sure his face would have revealed his glee if anyone glanced at him now.

"Why is this not known?" Narcissa whispered. "Why not publicized?"

"Because no one did know." Potter sounded exhausted. "Our parents were gone that night, and then they thought my scar was an ordinary one, caused by a bit of fallen ceiling. They believed that Connor was the one who had destroyed the Dark Lord, since his scar was obviously a curse one, and it fit—it fit certain parameters that Dumbledore believed in."

Lucius could feel his nostrils almost twitching. Narcissa turned and looked at him, and he could see from her face how much he and she were in accord. There was a deeper mystery here, one they could smell, one that would change everything, if they could only figure out what it was.

“Yet you know the truth now.” Narcissa’s voice was a light, jabbing one, a feint, meant not to let her opponent notice the truth of her attack until it was too late. “You said that someone you trusted told you this. Why have you not brought it to the papers? What they could make of this—”

“I don’t want them to.”

Potter’s eyes had opened, and Lucius caught his breath at the coldness in them. Magic swelled around him, filling the air with a low snarl, a thrum of power. Potter cocked his head to the side, his scar flaring like a bolt of fire or blood on his head. Come to think of it, there were trails of dried blood down his face, which appeared to lead from his brow. A consequence of the dreams?

“But you must see that it’s for the best, Harry.” Narcissa’s voice was gentle, persuasive, patient. She’d given up the sneak attack as a bad idea, then. “There are thousands of people who would rally to your side if they realized what you were going through, that they’d been supporting the wrong Boy-Who-Lived all along. Think of the alliances you could forge if people knew the truth.”

Potter growled under his breath. Lucius felt the air grow colder. He was reminded of some times when his lord had been enraged, and he followed the instincts he’d developed then. He sat perfectly still.

“The truth is bound up with other truths that would make them despise me,” said Potter. “Being the Dark Lord’s magical heir isn’t exactly something that would thrill a lot of people into following me. And telling the truth would lose me the support of people who believe the lie, as well as make me even more of a target for the Death Eaters than I am already. I don’t think the wizarding world can afford to polarize itself in some kind of stupid civil war around which Potter twin killed Voldemort the first time.”

Narcissa was silent again. Lucius felt unusually close to her, and could tell exactly which twists and turns her mind was making. What other truths would make people despise him? And who is he protecting? He isn’t selfish enough to want his brother to suffer the

brunt of attacks, from the Dark Lord or not, just so that he could escape.

“Harry—“ Narcissa began again.

“No. I won’t do it.”

Potter’s eyes were blazing, the air around him wild with magic. Lucius lowered his eyes and extended his hands in an open-palmed gesture of surrender. Narcissa repeated the motion beside him.

Draco only leaned nearer to Potter and whispered something in his ear.

Potter relaxed abruptly, every muscle in his body falling loose. Then he laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound, but the magic had dissipated, and Lucius knew that meant the worst was over. He began to breathe again.

“No, Mrs. Malfoy,” Potter repeated a moment later, his voice much lighter. “I don’t want to.”

“That is your choice, Harry,” said Narcissa. Lucius knew her well enough to read the determination beneath the words. Any truth Potter was hiding might somehow concern Draco, too, if their lives were to be bound together. Narcissa would seek it out, whatever it was, and make sure it could not hurt her son. “I hope that you will at least consider our assistance in getting back to Hogwarts.”

“That would be brilliant.” Potter rubbed at his eyes, and as his aura calmed completely, he seemed very much a child. “Thank you.”

Lucius cleared his throat. “I do intend to come and visit you on Yule, Potter. I hope you haven’t forgotten? The evening of Christmas Day, we shall conclude our truce-dance.”

Potter’s eyes came back to his with gratifying alertness and awareness. “I remember, sir. I’ll see you then.”

Narcissa escorted the boys to the fireplace to Floo back. Lucius remained where he was, intent on dealing with his own emotions.

It is not often that the future changes in a single hour.

Not often, but Lucius had been through a few such hours before, including one on Halloween thirteen years ago. He could get through this one.

And revel, always, in the knowledge that he had made the right choice. It was pleasant to know that, when forced to commit instead of watch and wait and hover between decisions as he liked to do, he had chosen the winning side.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Meleager's Fire

The day hadn't been too bad, Harry thought, as he lay in bed that night. Millicent had reported back to him that she'd been making progress with the centaurs, and that they no longer fussed at her about loosening their bindings right away—as she thought they had been doing with all their talk of wandering stars, though admittedly, with centaurs, it was hard to tell. She could actually understand them when they talked, now.

Pansy had shared a book full of fey stories with him, which her mother had given her when she was a girl. The stories changed their endings to suit whoever was reading them. In this case, the book had been confused between Pansy's and Harry's moods, and had ended up choosing ridiculous endings most of the time. Harry had even laughed once or twice.

Draco hadn't said much, but he'd simply been there, with one hand brushing Harry's, or one hand cupping his elbow, or a glance turned on him, whenever Harry started to waver in consideration of what would go forward tomorrow. Since the night he and Harry had dashed to the Manor, he seemed less inclined to go into fits about whoever his crush was, more calm and reserved, balanced and watchful. Harry had to admit that he preferred his friend this way.

They had all done what they could to cushion him against the blow they knew was coming.

Harry closed his eyes.

Snape's trial is tomorrow. I really should get some sleep if I can. Snape gazed out the window of his cell. Oh, he knew it was fake, the way all the Ministry's windows were; with the building so far underground, there was no way that they could be anything but false. Still, the slanting of the sunlight, autumn sunlight over faded trees, gave him some peace.

He liked to think that he had learned to appreciate peace, and such views, in the past few months.

That did not mean that he was any less eager to get this farce of a trial done with and know, one way or another, what his fate would be. Either back in Hogwarts, teaching again, finding out the truth behind Harry's and Draco's carefully noncommittal letters, facing the Headmaster...

Or here, and looking out at the autumn trees again before they sent him to whatever prison they'd come up with as a substitute for Azkaban.

Snape shook his head and turned to the table behind him. The furnishings of the cell were limited: one table, one high-backed chair, one low bed, one rug, one bookshelf that filled up with books which vanished again on the room's or his captors' whim. The Daily Prophet also arrived on the table each morning, though Snape did not often do more than skim the articles. The Skeeter woman was running out of new material to report about Harry, and had been reduced to reporting on the upcoming Yule Ball.

There will be much for us to talk about, Snape thought, remembering the photograph of Harry on his broom, facing three dragons. Not least, what you have been doing with yourself all these months.

And, of course, what in the world Harry had done to get his father to drop the charges against Snape.

Snape shook his head and took a place in the chair, reaching for the Daily Prophet. Of course, the headline announced:

FORMER DEATH EATER TO BE TRIED TODAY

Snape found that he had no appetite for news.

He put the paper back on the table and turned an impatient glance on the door. He still did not have his wand, of course, but the paper appeared promptly at nine o'clock every morning. That meant his breakfast should not be long in coming. An hour behind that would be his escort to the trial.

Snape told himself that was not terrified. He had faced the Wizengamot before, when he was first accused of being a Death Eater. He had done something far more terrible then. This time, there were only the accusations of the Minister to consider, accusations which Fudge, now deposed from office, did not even have the authority to try him for anymore. An Elder from the Wizengamot would do the questioning instead. It would not have come this far if Snape had been the guardian of anyone but Harry Potter.

And if I want to remain his guardian, then I will outface them all.

Oh, yes, Snape knew his two months in captivity had changed him, but they had not made him less dangerous, particularly when he had something that he wanted to fight for.

Someone knocked on the door. Snape paused, his eyes narrowing. Always before, the server had called his name and waited until Snape had opened the door to let him in; Snape could not leave the room without falling unconscious, but his being able to open the door to let in visitors let the Ministry pretend they were giving him a modicum of privacy.

A slight change in routine, he thought. Perhaps someone bribed the guard to see the famous Death Eater prisoner today, when it might be the last chance he'll have. There could easily be a rational explanation.

But he had not stayed alive for so long by finding rational explanations for things that made him uneasy.

He stepped back and took his chair without a sound. The person at the door knocked again, and again. Still there was no call. Unusual. Why?

Perhaps he fears that I will recognize his voice.

A moment later, there came the sound of urgently muttered spells, and Snape saw several of the wards on the door, faint lines of color he was no longer aware of unless he squinted, flicker and die. Then the buzz in his ears that reminded him at all times of the price he

would pay if he tried to depart faded. Someone had taken that particular ward down, as well.

I wonder what it's to be? Snape thought, his mind cold and dark, working at high speed. He felt as he had when he was a spy in that last year of the War, but he had not quite descended to the level of the ice that had caused him so much trouble with Harry. He had promised himself not to go in that direction again. Straightforward assassination attempt, or killed trying to escape?

The wizard at the door pushed it open.

Snape pulled his head back below the level of his chair, and carefully, carefully lifted the shields on his own magic. In a silent rush, it rose around him, powerful and well-trained. He could not manage much wandless power in comparison to the Headmaster and Harry, and he had made sure not to advertise that he could perform it at all. He had no need of it when he was playing along with this farce, to show willing.

He did not intend to let himself be killed on the verge of walking free, however.

He recognized the heavy, shuffling tread of the wizard who came into the room, and curled his lip. Macnair. No wonder he thought I would recognize his voice. Snape might even have recognized his use of spells, if it wasn't for the wards. Macnair was all lumbering, brute magical strength, not unintelligent, but hindered by a severe lack of finesse when he cast.

Silently, Snape prepared a curse that would pierce the outer lining of Macnair's heart. He would die fast and undetectably; it would require an investigation to confirm a magical cause of death, and the Ministry was unlikely to conduct one when they saw the Mark on Macnair's left arm.

The air around him clashed with steel as he prepared to let the spell fly like a dagger.

"Stupefy!"

Snape nearly jumped as he saw the red light of the hex stream into the room—coming from the door. He still could not see over the back of the chair, but he heard Macnair utter a helpless grunt and fall. That meant that whoever had fired that hex was a friend of his.

Perhaps. Or else someone who did not want to share in the glory of the kill.

“Professor Snape,” said Auror Mallory’s voice, calm and controlled. “Are you all right?”

Snape took a moment to smooth and lock his magic back under his shields before he stood. The witch was just powerful enough that she might sense something amiss, otherwise. “I am, madam,” he said.

Mallory nodded once, and glanced down at Macnair’s body. “We found your usual server paralyzed and blinded,” she said. “I don’t even know him. Who is he?”

“Walden Macnair,” said Snape. “As for what reason he would have to wish to kill me, check his left forearm.”

Mallory blinked once, and then banished all signs of her startlement. She nodded. “I promised that you would reach your trial alive,” she told Snape, “and you will.”

Snape nodded back to her. He could not say he liked the woman—her power level alone, dangerously close to his, made that impossible—but he respected her, and the respect was not all grudging. The Prophet said that she would be the likely choice to take over the Auror Office if Scrimgeour won the election and the post of Minister. She was a good choice. Snape trusted her to keep her word.

Mallory waved her wand, and conjured a plate of buttered toast and tea. “I’m afraid that you’ll have to eat faster than normal,” she said. “The trial will start at half past nine instead of at ten.”

Snape raised an eyebrow as he sat down to eat. “And whose idea was that?”

Mallory blinked innocently at him while she renewed the wards on the room. "Why, Professor Snape. These things happen, and I am sure I have no idea to what you are referring. It would be entirely out of line for me to tell you that Harold Hallowhunt, one of the Minister's supporters on the Wizengamot, suggested that the trial should be moved up in an attempt to make your witnesses miss it. Of course, I am sure that Mr. Hallowhunt was only thinking of the good of wizarding kind as a whole."

This one was trained by Scrimgeour, Snape thought wryly as he turned to his toast. And it is to be hoped that he wins the election. Madam Bones is too honorable, and short-sighted in her honor. We need someone who can make problems...disappear as well as face them head-on.

He managed quite a bit of his breakfast while Mallory Body-Bound Macnair and took him to deposit in a cell. His throat didn't close up until the witch came back to the door, caught his eye, and nodded. In all, he was impressed with himself.

Harry had expected the second time he was in the Wizengamot's courtroom to be less intimidating than the first. After all, he had some idea of what it looked like, now, and how the wizards and witches liked to arrange themselves. And he knew that there were going to be people there today who were friendly and sympathetic to his cause.

It turned out not to be the case. There had been nobody at the Minister's hearing who wasn't either part of the Wizengamot or someone, like Harry and Scrimgeour, required to be there because they were part of the original process of the motion. Harry suspected Fudge's allies had been able to insure that. Now, though, there were observers spilling into the courtroom, wizards and witches in everything from tattered robes to formal pureblood wear, come to watch and gawk.

Harry realized, this time, that Dumbledore took a circuitous route that, while it appeared to bring them into contact with many members of the Wizengamot, conveniently hid them from most of the watchers, or allowed at most a small glimpse. He didn't mind. He knew that he

would have to testify on Snape's behalf, and he was prepared to deal with that. He was not keen on being recognized as "that boy what's been in the papers lately," as he had heard himself referred to in one terrifying conversation he and the Headmaster had barely skirted.

"Harry."

Harry blinked and looked up. Dumbledore was watching him—closely, as he had a habit of doing these days, and without a smile.

"Once the trial begins," he said quietly, "I will need you to mask your emotions. Severus has been accused of something that, all things considered, I would be quite surprised to learn he did not do. That means that we need to be patient, calm, rational, and legal. Letting your anger or your sorrow go in such a situation would not be productive."

Harry nodded.

Dumbledore nodded back, and then escorted him to his seat, once again a small chair behind Dumbledore's larger one. Harry took it with a sense of relief. He looked around, but didn't see Umbridge, or either of the two other members of the Wizengamot who had voted to retain Fudge as Minister last time. He relaxed.

"Good morning."

I really ought to stop relaxing in situations like this. Harry rose to his feet to greet Scrimgeour, a bit surprised to see the Auror. "Why are you attending the trial, sir?" he asked. "I thought you would be out campaigning."

"Did I tell you," said Scrimgeour, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "that I'm a connoisseur of facial expressions?"

Harry blinked. "No, sir, you never have."

"I like watching 'em," said Scrimgeour happily. "I savor the moment when, for example, a criminal who's come to the chair smirking and swaggering realizes we have all the evidence we need to convict him."

I liked watching the former Death Eaters realize that their names and their money wouldn't save 'em from being tried, just like normal people. I lean forward to catch every last glimpse of the woman who killed her husband and tried to make it look like an accident while the Wizengamot's vote runs against her."

Harry lifted his eyebrows. "I had not known you were so...savage, sir."

"I expect to see some particularly choice expressions today," said Scrimgeour, his affected Muggleborn way of speaking becoming more pronounced. "Yeh've got to understand, Potter, there are people on the court today who'd be just as happy to see the vote run against yer guardian. The Minister was one thing, a threat to their livelihood. Snape was a Death Eater, and a lot of 'em don't like Death Eaters. Never have, never will."

Harry clenched his hands. He could not bear the thought of losing Snape to whatever prison the Wizengamot had come up with in lieu of Azkaban, but he understood it was a possibility he had to face. "And you're going to look at my face when they announce the guilty verdict?" he asked.

Scrimgeour snorted a laugh. "No. I'm looking forward to what they do when they call the witnesses for the prosecution. Watch 'em, Potter. That'll be a sight to see." He turned on his heel and strode back down the ranks of the court towards the far side of the room, his robes flying behind him, though there should have been no room to stride like that. Harry watched him go in puzzlement.

I wonder why he's going so far out of his way to help us? Was it just because he didn't like Fudge?

Harry had no answer, though, so he had to take his seat instead of doing anything better. The room was nearly full to bursting, and he heard someone already shouting for order. Since Fudge wasn't part of the court anymore, and Amelia Bones was campaigning in her election for Minister, and Dumbledore had told Harry already that he'd turned down the opportunity to lead the questioning, that meant the

privilege of leadership would pass to the oldest member of the Wizengamot.

Who—

“Attention,” said a gentle voice enhanced with acoustics spells. “Attention, if you would please.”

Harry smiled as he watched the little old witch standing up in her seat on one side of the balcony. Griselda Marchbanks was probably the oldest member of the Wizengamot. She looked it on her face, but her voice rang clear and strong, and people paid attention. Wizards and witches sat down, and, while nothing probably could have made the audience be quiet, their talking receded to a low hum.

“Welcome, ladies, gentlemen, and gentlebeings,” Madam Marchbanks began. “This is a rather unusual trial. The Wizengamot is trying it because former Minister Fudge brought the charges, but he is no longer part of the court, hence the reason I am leading.” She dipped a graceful little bow. “Madam Marchbanks, at your service. I’ve seen one hundred sixty years, served fifty of them on the Wizengamot, and still, I believe this is one of the more unusual cases to come before us.”

That increased the excited humming of the watchers. Harry swallowed. Unusual? Why? Is there something I don’t know about?

“For starters,” Madam Marchbanks went on, shuffling through the papers before her, “there were two sets of charges in the beginning of the trial, one from the former Minister, one from James Potter—“

That name made the buzz increase again. Harry swatted at a beetle hovering around his head, and hoped no one would start looking around the courtroom to see if a Potter was there, or, worse, cast a spell to find him.

“But the Potter charges have been dropped,” the old witch finished. “And the Minister is no longer with us, though I hope the Wizengamot has done a good enough job in his absence. That means that the trial of Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master and Head of Slytherin at

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, will be conducted on a reduced set of charges, and rely almost solely on witness and prisoner testimony, rather than the promised written evidence.”

Another buzz circled the courtroom. Harry closed his eyes and let out his breath. He could see why Dumbledore had told him to be patient, and keep control of his emotions. A misstep at this point could be fatal to rescuing Snape, since there were eyes that would be looking for evidence of shadows in the way Harry, and the other witnesses, told their stories.

“Bring in the prisoner!”

Harry found himself leaning forward, angling for a glimpse of Snape. It had been two months, after all, and for all that Snape had acted like an idiot in the short while before he left—and let himself get caught at it, which was worse—Harry wanted desperately to see him.

Snape had always thought himself a patient man. As he waited before the closed doors of the Wizengamot courtroom, he had to reconsider that self-assessment. His skin was itching, and not just because he stood between two Aurors who both held their wands, while he had none, or because this antechamber was utterly devoid of any decoration, all bare, blank stone.

He wanted to get in there and get this trial done with.

Mallory frowned and walked forward to press her ear against the doors, as though wondering if she had somehow missed the signal to bring him in. At once, the other Auror, the young, nervous one with the ridiculous blue hair, gave a little cough and leaned nearer to Snape.

“Professor?” she all but squeaked.

Snape gave her a carefully measured look. He remembered Nymphadora Tonks as an indifferent student, not incompetent enough to irritate him, but not good enough to earn his regard, either. She’d also been clumsy enough to tip over numerous cauldrons,

though luckily not to cause explosions. That did not bode well for whatever she was about to ask him.

Tonks bit her lip, worried at it, and then said all at once, "Kingsley Shacklebolt wants me to join the Order of the Phoenix, and I don't know if I should, and I'm worried about it, and I don't like it, and I wanted your opinion." She stared at him, then, as if he should have immediate wise advice to offer.

Snape blinked at her for only a moment. Then he sneered. Tonks's face drooped.

Snape did not care. Here was an opportunity to vent his frustration before he entered the court, and go in calmer.

"Consider, Miss Tonks," he murmured, shifting his wrists so that his manacles rang together behind his back, "that I was a member of the Order, too, and risked my life against the Dark Lord, and served Albus Dumbledore as faithfully as I knew how. Yet, in the months since I have been here, he has not made an effort to visit me, nor, so far as I know, to make sure my trial goes well." He had to speak quickly, since Mallory was walking back towards them, and he chose his words with care. "Dumbledore named the Order after his own phoenix, Fawkes. But the bird left him last year."

Tonks all but recoiled. "But that means—" she gasped.

"What means what, Auror Tonks?" Mallory asked, as she slid into place on the other side of him again. Snape could feel her watchfulness, knew she was more loyal to the law than either of them, but didn't care. He felt better. Tonks had tried to hand him her own burden, and he had given it back, with interest. That always made him feel more like himself.

"Nothing," said Tonks, and then sighed. Her hair turned brown. "Nothing at all."

Mallory looked at them both suspiciously, but the call came from inside then, and the doors swung open, and they could proceed. Snape walked with his chin up, masking himself in black ice, and

returning the stares he got with such an indifference that he saw some of the wizards and witches shrink back. He moved his head in an indecipherable nod. That is as it should be.

Once, he had gone through this, and then, he had been stark terrified, relying on Dumbledore's word alone to save him. Now, with less notion of what was to come, he outfaced the stares. Perhaps, he considered, it was because last time he had had only his own life and freedom to fight for. This time, along with that, he had the promise of returning to Hogwarts and Harry.

And that is too ridiculously sentimental a notion to entertain.

Tonks and Mallory brought him to the chair in the center of the courtroom, and settled him into it. Since his hands were still chained behind his back, they didn't bother with the shackles on the arms of the seat. Snape was glad of it. He could arrange himself more comfortably, and sneer at people more effectively.

Uncompromising faces met his from every direction. Snape did not care. There were very few of them who mattered to him. He did note the old witch who would lead the questioning, and Scrimgeour's endlessly amused gaze, and, of course, Dumbledore's piercing stare.

For some odd reason, his eyes didn't move past Dumbledore when he willed them to. At first he thought the old wizard was using some kind of compulsion, but then he recognized the flare of familiar power. Dumbledore's magic could not quite cloak it.

Harry.

Snape hoped he did not allow anything to show on his face, but then all hope of that went as a small shape forced its way past Dumbledore and up to the railing of the balcony, bending down so that its eyes could meet his.

Harry looked exhausted, even from this distance. But Snape recognized the clenching of his jaw, and suspected that the boy had just set himself to fight for him with every bit of stubbornness he possessed.

Snape did permit himself, then, a brief nod of greeting. He could feel a sweet burning welling up in him, much like a pleasant version of the Meleager Potion he had set on Fudge.

I am going to come out of this alive, and free. If Harry has survived this so far, I can do no less.

Harry looked at Snape for a long moment. His guardian's face was not nearly as pale as he had imagined it would be, after two months of no sun. Of course, Snape spent much of his time in the dungeons anyway, so that would not be too great a change. And now he was sneering around the room with his customary look of disdain.

It heartened Harry more than he would have been able to express to see that Snape had passed through his captivity and come out the other side again.

I can do this. I can brave this, for his sake.

Dumbledore pushed at his shoulder, not-so-gently urging him back to his seat. Harry caught one last glimpse of Snape, to take with him, and then obeyed. He cast a Seeing Spell in the palm of his hand, as he had last time, to be able to watch the drama on the floor of the courtroom.

When the murmuring had died down again, Griselda Marchbanks began.

"Severus Snape," she murmured, her voice echoing from every side of the courtroom thanks to the spells, "you are charged with brewing an illegal potion, which you did not register with the Ministry of Magic. You are also charged with administering this potion to former Minister Fudge. The effects are unknown, but are not assumed to be beneficial." There was audible amusement at that. "Do you understand the accusations that have been made against you?"

"I do." Snape sounded—he sounded bored. Harry had a moment of pure and very Slytherin admiration.

“Under the Wizengamot’s Charter, you have the right to call a representative,” Madam Marchbanks said. “Do you choose to do so?”

“No. I will represent myself. I would trust no one else to speak half so well of me.” Another wide-spread wash of amusement.

“Very well. Do you wish to accept Veritaserum?”

“I do not.”

Madam Marchbanks sounded as if she’d expected that. “Very well. The prosecution has the right to call its witnesses first. As I am leading the questioning, I will take over this part of the trial. I call Cornelius Fudge, who has insisted on being here today to respond to you personally.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he watched Fudge bustle down into the middle of the courtroom. His robes hardly appeared less fine than what he’d worn when he was Minister, and he had the most intolerable look of self-satisfaction. What is Scrimgeour talking about? What facial expression?

Fudge halted in front of Snape’s chair and cleared his throat importantly. “My name is Cornelius Fudge,” he said, before Madam Marchbanks could even ask him. “Until recently, I served as Minister of Magic for Great Britain.”

“Of course.” The old witch’s voice was very bland. “Will you consent to answer some questions about the charges you have brought against Severus Snape?”

“Of course,” said Fudge back at her, oozing politeness and charm, and Harry could see how the man had managed to win elections. He didn’t look at Snape, but cast a smile around at everyone else. His charisma was about as thick as algae, but that could be enough to convince someone who didn’t know any better.

“Do you charge him with both brewing an illegal potion and feeding it to you on the autumnal equinox of this year?”

“Yes,” said Fudge, without missing a beat. “I did not know at the time that the potion was illegal, of course, but the healers at St. Mungo’s have examined me, and they could find no traces of it that matched any known potion. They did find unusual traces in my bloodstream, however.”

Harry closed his eyes. Snape let his will to vengeance overcome making it untraceable. I bet he used ingredients that he knew would cause pain. Honestly. That is something I’ll have to talk to him about.

“What were those unusual traces of?” Madam Marchbanks asked. Harry opened his eyes, and leaned around Fudge to see Snape. He winced. Snape had gone slightly paler, which was not in and of itself a testimony to Fudge’s trustworthiness, but was as good as a shout to someone who knew how to read the signs. He had not expected anyone to find the traces, then.

“Feverfew and Fire-Crab shell,” said Fudge. His voice was smug, now, as though he considered having borne those ingredients in his bloodstream sufficient price for bringing down an enemy. He probably did, Harry thought sourly. He’s a politician. “And also, death angel mushroom.”

A hiss traveled around the court. Harry winced. Yes, ingredients to cause pain. And of course no one but a Potions Master could brew a potion that would keep that toxin from taking effect in a few hours. Damn it, Snape!

He could feel unease bubbling in the back of his mind, too, at the thought of how much Snape must have wanted Fudge to suffer.

He heard Madam Marchbanks asking the expected question—how was Fudge still alive?—and Fudge giving the expected answer—through Snape’s skill. He took a deep breath and looked down at the window again.

“We must concede that it is extremely likely a Potions Master could brew such a fatal draught,” Madam Marchbanks was saying, her voice uneven. Harry was reminded of something Snape had told him once, how it disconcerted many wizards to think that someone could

do something to them that did not require waving a wand, and might take effect hours, days, months, years, after it was ingested. “What side effects have you noticed from this potion, Mr. Fudge?”

Harry raised his brows as he watched Fudge flush for the first time. I hope Scrimgeour is doing this.

“Well, none,” he admitted grudgingly. “The only things I know about it are that it smelled like chocolate, and Snape—the prisoner—made me lick it from my fingers.” A titter went around the courtroom at that. Fudge tried valiantly to persist, though his ears were turning red now. “And there’s the traces in my bloodstream. But that’s all, really.” He rallied. “But that’s more than enough! Who knows what horrible things this potion could have done to me?”

“Thank you, Mr. Fudge,” said Madam Marchbanks. “That is all for now.” Fudge lifted his head and paraded back to the stairs. “The Wizengamot calls the second witness for the prosecution, Augustus Starrise.”

There was a long silence. Harry stared into his window, and then glanced up and around the courtroom, but saw no one moving.

He did catch a glimpse of Rufus Scrimgeour grinning like a fiend.

“Augustus Starrise,” Madam Marchbanks repeated, sounding a little less sure of herself this time. “Where is Mr. Starrise?”

“I can answer that, Madam,” Scrimgeour’s voice called. “It seems that Mr. Starrise recently fought a duel under the Sunset Accords, and lost, so he’s forbidden participation in politics for a year. I’m sure the Wizengamot understands the impact of this sacred tradition. Should Mr. Starrise testify in court today, he could literally pay the price of an arm or a leg.”

Madam Marchbanks was blinking. “But—such circumstances are not usually binding in the case of legal testimony,” she said. “I have seen witches and wizards who feel themselves tied to the Sunset Accords still testifying during their year away from the bustle of the Ministry.”

Scrimgeour shrugged elaborately. “In this case, Mr. Starrise felt that he should not be here. He sends his regrets, I’m sure.”

Harry grinned despite himself. He had to admit that the expressions on many of the faces around them were worth watching for. Some of them were obviously trying to figure out why Scrimgeour would have fought such a duel with Starrise and how he had won, while others were figuring out what it would mean that Starrise was bound not to testify on the former Minister’s behalf.

“I—” Madam Marchbanks shook her head. “Very well. There are no other official witnesses for the prosecution, then. Unless anyone wants to volunteer?”

No one did. Of course, Harry knew, even the ones who wanted the case to go against Snape must know there was really nothing they could add. Snape’s original meeting with Fudge had been too private for them to be able to corroborate what he had said.

“The case moves to the defense,” said Madam Marchbanks briskly. “Mr. Snape, the court will question you first.”

“Very well.” Snape had recovered entirely from the surprise Fudge had dealt him, and merely looked blank.

“Did you create a potion that you did not register with the Ministry?”

“I did.”

“Did the potion contain the ingredients that Mr. Fudge detailed—that is, feverfew, Fire-Crab shell, and death angel mushroom?”

Harry saw Snape’s shoulders tighten momentarily, but he said only, “It did.”

The courtroom all but shrieked. Madam Marchbanks had to shout for order before she got it, and she went on more sternly. “Why would you include such ingredients in the potion, Mr. Snape?”

“As you may or may not know,” Snape began, “there are many ingredients in most potions which, though fatal in and of themselves, lose their toxicity when combined with others. Death angel mushroom is one such.” Harry felt a faint stab of amusement through the fear when he realized that Snape was lecturing. “It is a common cure for poisoning, actually, the theory being that the extreme venom of the mushroom helps to drive out the first poison. There are some Calming Draughts that require it. The Draught of Ceasing, used to cure convulsions, could not be made without it.”

“The court did not ask for a lecture on potions making, Mr. Snape.” Madam Marchbanks did sound interested, despite herself. “What was the potion intended to do to the former Minister?”

Burn him, Harry thought, and shivered.

“It was a prank potion,” said Snape, with a little irritation in his voice, as though he could not understand why people would keep misinterpreting things. “I intended for the Minister to exhibit some of the more embarrassing side-effects such ingredients can cause on their own. Thus, he would undergo the cramping and diarrhea caused by the death angel toxin. It was not, and I repeat, not fatal.”

There was a disbelieving murmur, and Madam Marchbanks said, “Is there any independent source that can corroborate this, Mr. Snape?”

“Of course not.” Snape sneered openly. “I made the potion in private, and did not register it with the Ministry. That is the very thing I am charged with, if I may remind the court. I can tell you, if you really wish to hear it, that I was well-known, as a child in Hogwarts, for making similar potions. The Headmaster can testify to that, as can Remus Lupin and James Potter.”

The court stirred and hissed among themselves. Harry could feel how delicate the balance was. On the one hand, they had no reason to believe Snape, and most of them would have been prejudiced by the mention of the fatal ingredients in the potion. On the other hand, it was undeniably true that Fudge had suffered no ill effects so far, and that, if it came down to what had transpired so far, it was the former

Minister's word against Snape's. And this was the same court that had voted the Minister out of power only a few weeks before.

It was too delicate. Harry did not know if he could get Snape out of here as matters stood.

As matters stand. They have to be redressed. Better, they have to be redressed by some dramatic gesture.

Good thing I'm so good at those, isn't it?

"The court has no more questions," Madam Marchbanks was saying. "Do you wish to call any witnesses, Mr. Snape?"

Harry could almost feel Snape's eyes rising to pick him out, as well as see it in his window, but Snape simply shook his head. Harry hissed in frustration. Dumbledore told me that I'd be required to testify. I think he was betting on Snape calling me. And of course the stubborn idiot won't.

"Does anyone wish to volunteer as a witness?" Madam Marchbanks asked.

Now.

Harry stood. "I do," he called.

"And your name is?" Harry thought Madam Marchbanks knew it very well, but of course she couldn't see him directly from where she was standing.

"Harry Potter."

The court exploded in excited whispering again. Harry could feel his heart hammering, his world spinning like it did when he'd just seen the Snitch and was about to fall towards the ground in pursuit. He knew how great a risk he was taking with this. It could so easily go wrong. On the other hand, if he didn't do this, he was leaving matters up to chance, and he didn't want to do that. He did want to play some controlling part, no matter how small.

I guess I'm a Slytherin in that way, too.

"Very well, Mr. Potter," said Madam Marchbanks. "If you will approach the prisoner, the court will question you."

Harry didn't move. "I have one more thing to say, Madam. I wish to testify under Veritaserum."

This time, he might have set the court on fire.

Harry closed his eyes, and fell.

Snape would have gripped the arms of the chair if his hands weren't chained behind his back. As it was, he could only watch in horrified, helpless anger as Harry approached him, and Auror Mallory, her face white with her own shock, brought out a clear vial.

Harry did not watch her. He watched Snape instead, and he couldn't hide the faint flush on his cheeks, which someone else might have taken as born from nervousness or embarrassment. Snape knew better. This was born from exhilaration, from the incomprehensible pleasure Harry had in taking a risk.

He cannot take this one. He has no right to take this one. He cannot win if he does!

Except Snape knew there was a small chance he might win, as long as Madam Marchbanks only asked the right questions and not any of the wrong ones. And if he did, then the dramatic gesture—a child testifying in favor of his guardian, and a child hero besides, and willingly taking Veritaserum, which no one had even suggested to him—would swung support rapidly to his side.

He had no doubt that Harry knew that, too. It was the reason he would have chosen this course.

I will strangle him. The stubborn idiot! He has no right to make this sacrifice for me!

It was too late for that, though, and Snape had no right to protest when Harry was a voluntary witness. All was flashing uncertainty at the moment, like one of those damn Quidditch matches, and Snape could only watch from the sidelines.

Harry accepted the Veritaserum with a murmur of thanks, and placed three drops on his tongue without hesitation. Snape was not surprised that he did not look slack and inattentive. Harry had an Occlumens's mind now, and would be able to watch the pale chains sprouting around his thoughts and commanding that he speak only truth.

That did not mean he could break them. Snape had never been able to lie under Veritaserum, only control his own emotional reactions.

Control his own emotional reactions.

By all that is sacred. In the name of Merlin. That is what he means to do.

"What is your full name?" Madam Marchbanks asked.

"Harry James Potter," said Harry. He still hadn't looked away from Snape.

"Where do you attend school?"

"Dur—Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," said Harry, showing them beyond all doubt that the Veritaserum worked, though he'd had no need to. He flashed a small smile at Snape.

"And your Headmaster is?"

"Albus Dumbledore."

Madam Marchbanks nodded. "The Veritaserum is in order, then. The questions may begin. Mr. Potter, what do you believe Mr. Snape's purpose in brewing the potion he fed to Minister Fudge was?"

Harry turned and glanced up at her, his eyes wide open and innocent.

“To hurt him,” he said. “And he wanted to hurt him because he was protecting me. Minister Fudge abducted me at the end of August, and held me in a private room without benefit of legal counsel, or my legal guardian. I was at first informed that my guardian could come along, and then denied his presence. Then the former Minister tried to drain my magic. Professor Snape has a temper. He decided to brew the potion because of that.”

Another murmur. Snape shook his head, a bit dazed. Harry was, in his own way, dancing through the interrogation even though he was under Veritaserum. It made Snape’s ears ring.

“Do you believe that he would have killed the Minister?” Madam Marchbanks asked.

“Yes,” said Harry. “He would do anything to protect me.” He turned to Snape and offered him a smile. “I am intensely grateful for that about him. He’s—” Harry’s face closed for a moment, as though he’d almost changed his mind about whatever he was going to say, but the potion forced the truth from him. “He’s the best parent I’ve ever had.”

“Your blood parents are still alive?” Madam Marchbanks added a touch of sharpness to her voice, as well she might. She was pureblooded, and for most wizards, blood family was important above anything else.

Harry lifted his chin, and Snape saw sweat gleaming on his forehead. Oh, dangerous, this is dangerous, they might learn something that Harry would give his life to protect—

“They both are, Madam,” said Harry.

“And you do not wish to live with them?”

“I do not wish to live with them,” Harry said.

“You wish to live with Professor Snape instead?”

"I do." Harry took a deep breath, and forged on, before the witch could ask why. "Experience has taught me that I'm safer with Professor Snape than either of my blood parents, both physically and—and emotionally." He winced. "I believe that he would have killed to protect me, but most parents will kill to protect their children from someone they think is an enemy. And the former Minister might have murdered me, too, for all Professor Snape knew at the time. When the facts of the case came out, the Minister attempted to force me to return to the care of my blood parents, with whom I feel profoundly unsafe. I do not believe it is a coincidence that Professor Snape grew so angry."

Snape closed his eyes. He knew that someone else might think it was a sign of falsehood or weakness. He did not care. He could not afford to look at Harry right now without deeply betraying something that should more properly wait until he could speak to Harry alone.

I know what it cost him to admit that. But this is a sacrifice not torn from him against his will, but freely laid down. We shall speak about that, about his tendency to do that, but to hear the words, after all that has happened in the weeks before I was arrested...

Snape startled himself by feeling a profound moment of pity for both James Potter and Lily Potter, who would never understand what they had lost.

"I see." Madam Marchbanks's voice was deeply shaken. She cleared her throat, as if attempting to recover herself. "Do you believe the potion would have any fatal effects, Mr. Potter?"

"I think it might," said Harry. "I am utterly ignorant of whatever other effects it could have. Professor Snape never confided in me while he was brewing the potion."

All true, Snape thought, but it was a fragile tissue of truth that could be torn down if the right questions were asked.

"He never told you the name of the potion?" Madam Marchbanks demanded.

Snape stiffened. He could not discount the possibility that Harry might have seen his notes.

Then he ran the phrasing of the question over in his head again, and wanted to laugh. Once again, one step away from disaster.

"No, Madam, he did not," Harry said firmly.

"You do realize that he still tried to commit murder, Mr. Potter?" the witch demanded.

"I don't know that, no." Snape opened his eyes, and saw his ward's eyes darken as he glared up at the court. "I told you that I believe he would have killed the Minister, that he made the potion to hurt him, and that it might have fatal effects. But those effects haven't manifested, Madam Marchbanks. Until they do, we only have Mr. Fudge's word against Professor Snape's. And as neither of them testified under Veritaserum, they're both equally trustworthy."

Snape began to breathe deeply again, as he had not since Fudge revealed the Healers finding the ingredients in his bloodstream. Harry's claim would have been laughable in most other circumstances; who would trust a Potions Master who brewed potentially fatal draughts? But with Fudge his only opponent, with the dangerous Starrise witness removed, he had a good chance.

And thanks to Harry's utterly insane bravery, of course.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," said Madam Marchbanks. "No further questions."

Harry bowed to the court, then turned and bowed to Snape. Snape flinched a bit when he met the steady, open stare of those green eyes.

You are worth this, they said.

So Snape had better act like he was worth it.

He watched in silence as Harry turned and climbed the stairs again, and as Madam Marchbanks called for any other witnesses, of which there were none, and then for the Wizengamot to vote.

Harry sank into his chair and closed his eyes. His ploy had succeeded. He was still alive.

But Snape isn't free yet.

He opened his eyes, and forced himself to ignore both the curious gazes on him and the trembling in his muscles. That was close to the hardest thing he had ever done, not counting his confrontations with Voldemort. This isn't done yet.

He watched as the voting moved around the Wizengamot. Amelia Bones was gone, as well as one other witch, and that left an uneven number.

Umbridge, of course, voted Snape as guilty. So did the other two Elders Harry remembered as supporting Fudge. Three to nothing, then.

Harry refused to bolt out of the chair, or gasp.

Madam Marchbanks looked down into the center of the courtroom. "Innocent," she said softly.

Harry closed his eyes.

He heard the votes after that, and tallied them up in his head. No one was abstaining on this one.

Thirteen guilty, twelve innocent...

Fourteen innocent, sixteen guilty...

Seventeen innocent, eighteen guilty...

As if in a dream, Harry heard the voting tallied at twenty-four guilty, twenty-four innocent, and then the voices paused right in front of him. He opened his eyes.

“Innocent,” said Albus Dumbledore softly.

Harry leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, feeling tears burn behind them, while all around him the court erupted, yet again. Snape received his wand back from Auror Mallory herself. She gave him a tiny bow and a wry smile.

“Very well done,” she said. “I don’t know how you did it, but it was well done.” She paused. “Tell Harry hello for me.”

So it’s Harry now, is it? Snape did his best to stifle his protective snarl, and merely nodded to her. “I will,” he said, and then faced the stairs, his eyes finding Dumbledore at once, but not noticing Harry until he broke away from the shadows at the foot of the steps and came towards him.

Snape studied his charge intently. Now he could make out that the exhaustion he had seen was no deception; Harry’s face still showed the effects of lack of sleep, and intense emotional labor. But his eyes were shining, and his face wore a slowly widening smile, as though he could not believe he had achieved what he had.

Scolding can wait.

Harry halted in front of him, and they looked at each other for a moment.

“Harry,” said Snape.

“Professor,” said Harry, and then blinked and swallowed. “I—are you all right?”

Snape would have valued the concern in his tone in a different way just two months ago—as a sign that Harry was paying attention to him in the way he should, as something soothing. Now, he valued it as a sign that Harry cared about him—

If that is not too disgustingly sentimental a thought to entertain.

"I am, Harry," he said quietly. "And though there are no words for what I have done or what you have, I will say this. I apologize for what I put you through before I left Hogwarts. I had no right to do that to you. I will not ask for forgiveness until you feel truly ready to give it. And I thank you for what you have done for me today, and for all that you are."

Harry stood staring at him. He swallowed again, as though he wanted to speak, but found himself too choked to do so.

Snape did not even care anymore that people were watching. He knew what he wanted to do.

He took a deep breath, because there were still parts of him that objected to this and whose censure he could not so easily escape, and held out his arms.

Harry made a sound that had no name as he lunged forward and returned the embrace, and was caught in Snape's.

Snape lowered his head and half-closed his eyes. Whatever I have done evil in the past, may it be made up for by what I will do in the future. I am not letting him go again. He said he felt I would kill to protect him. Well, I may do other things, also.

Albus turned away from the scene on the floor below him. It could not have been prevented, of course. He did need Severus back, and Harry had kept his side of the bargain. He had voted for Severus's innocence because he had to.

He had had no idea that Harry would do what he had, however, and he was surprised and unnerved at the extent to which the boy relied on Severus. Now that he had his guardian back, he was unlikely to run headlong into the traps Albus had set for him, and thus the wizarding world was likely still to be in danger of his unbalancing power.

It is good that I have plans already in motion, and that their fulfillment will come soon. I am sorry, Severus, Harry, but I cannot allow you to do what you could so easily do, together.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Dancing With Luna

Another of Lily's letters came at dinner on Christmas Eve.

Harry swallowed the bite of Christmas pudding in his mouth and scooped the letter off the table before anyone else could get too curious about it. Eyes followed the envelope as he dropped it into his robe pocket, but no one said anything, for which Harry was profoundly grateful. He kept his gaze on his plate and continued eating. After a moment, conversation resumed around him. Draco was muttering to himself about Christmas presents. Apparently, neither of his parents had sent him anything because they wanted to wait until tomorrow night, when Lucius would meet Harry and Draco after the Yule Ball.

And it's the conclusion of the truce-dance. Harry swallowed, and then shook his head. He'd spent some hours meditating on it, and still he had no idea what gift he would receive from Lucius. He would just have to wait and see, he supposed.

There might be a gift from your mother in that letter, you know.

Harry focused his eyes on the twelve Christmas trees scattered around the Great Hall. Several people were trying to pack the warm, enchanted snow drifting from the ceiling into balls, and complaining loudly when they didn't succeed.

The trees and the snow didn't distract him. Instead, they just made him remember what had happened at Godric's Hollow, the last time he had seen his mother, a year ago tonight.

You'll never know what she has to say if you don't open the letter.

Harry shook his head and stood. "I've had enough food, I think," he announced, as heads swiveled around to follow his movement. "I've got a private lesson with Professor Snape to go to anyway."

The others nodded, and Slytherins began to disperse from the table, chattering to each other. Most of the talk concerned the Yule Ball. Harry winced, and was careful not to look at Draco. He didn't know if

his friend had got a date or not. Draco simply went into frowns whenever he asked, or scowled if he was feeling truly angry.

“Harry?”

Harry blinked and tore himself from his distraction as the object of it came up beside him. “Yeah?”

“You do know that you can tell me who the letter’s from, right?” Draco had his eyebrows drawn down, in an expression of concentration that Harry had long since learned to distinguish from anger, especially since both of them were focused on him lately. “I mean, if you want to.”

Harry smiled slightly. This is his way of letting me know that my problems matter to him just as much as his do to me. “Yeah, I know that. I just don’t want to right now. I—” He shrugged. “It’s too much,” he said honestly. I don’t think I’m going to collapse crying this time—and oh Merlin, that was embarrassing!—but I still don’t want to talk to anyone about this. They’d all have advice, and I think it’s the kind of thing I need to figure out for myself.

Draco nodded to him, and then they parted, Draco turning for the Slytherin common room and Harry for the corridor that led to Snape’s offices. He pondered the whole way over the letter that rested like a burning coal in his pocket.

You could tear it to bits. But that wouldn’t give you the option of reading it later.

And he did want that option, Harry decided.

With a long, quiet sigh, he decided that he might as well leave it where it was for now. He could always decide later if he wanted to see what his mother had to say, that way, and he didn’t want to have make a more definite choice right now.

Snape lifted his head when Harry entered, and then frowned. His charge looked as though someone had drained all the color from his face. He took out his wand and the book on the Dark Arts that Snape

had set him to reading, but his expression remained frozen and thoughtful.

“Harry?” Snape asked quietly.

Harry blinked and looked up at him. “I—” he said, and then shook his head. “I’m all right,” he said, in a voice that was convincing if Snape didn’t look at his eyes. “I had a few questions about the variations on the Blasting Curse, sir. I tried them, and I didn’t do very well. Can you tell me why that is?”

Snape raised his brows, but stood and walked over to the table Harry’d put the book on. If he doesn’t want to talk to me directly about it, there are other ways of holding a conversation. Snape did not want to go too fast or be too direct, anyway. He and Harry were building their bond again step by small step, and they took care not to spend too much time in each other’s company.

“You tried the variations that called for strength and not finesse, didn’t you?” he asked, as he recognized the page that Harry had the book open at. It already bore a worn appearance, as though Harry had read it multiple times in his attempt to get everything right.

“Well, yes, sir.” Harry blinked at him. “I’m not that well-trained in the variations, but I’m pretty strong.”

Snape nodded. “Your training sometimes leaves you at a disadvantage, Harry,” he said, and saw a small flinch in the boy. Ah. Something to do with his parents, as I thought it might be, given what happened to him at this time last year. “You were taught control, though in somewhat—different areas than what Dark Arts usually require, I will agree. That means that you’re used to putting your strength in limits. It’s not easy to dig it out of those constraints and simply go flailing about with it. And that’s what the strength variations on the Blasting Curse call for. You might as well be hitting out with a hammer. And you’re more used to using a dagger than a hammer.” He drew his own wand. “Show me which one gave you the best results.”

Harry gestured with one hand. Snape had noticed that, too, how his charge tried now to keep his wandless magic closely bound to his body. He approved it as a sign of caution, but it was also yet another sign of how Harry adapted to control before he considered freedom, for either his magic or himself.

He has changed, but not that much. He's calmed around me, and around Draco. He accepts help more readily. But his own mind is still wrapped up in steel wire.

Snape watched as the Curse destroyed one of his chairs, which Harry repaired with the next motion, and nodded. "You will achieve better results if you attempt to choose one weak point, instead of simply spreading your strength over the whole of the chair," he said.

Harry's face brightened. "That was the commonality between the finesse-based variations that I couldn't see!" he exclaimed. He shook his head. "I'm slower at learning from books than Hermione. I do much better with demonstrations."

"That does not mean you are stupid, Harry."

Harry's head turned as if he were sensing danger. This was one of those direct things they didn't talk about as much. His eyes were wide as they watched Snape, asking him what he was doing, to abandon their safe routine of the last few days. Caution edged his voice as he replied, "I never said I was."

Snape spun his wand on one hand, thinking of the best way to phrase this. Nothing came to him. Speak as a diplomat, and Harry would let the soft words roll off him as he usually did. Speak as a Slytherin, and Harry would find half a hundred motives in the words and ignore the right ones. Say something that could possibly be connected to another person, and Harry would attempt to bounce Snape's attention to what that person was suffering. Snape had had to make it quite clear on his first day back at Hogwarts that he was not interested in talking about Draco's problems, Granger's problems, Connor's problems, Weasley's problems, or anyone else's problems but Harry's during these private sessions.

So that leaves hard words, and direct truth.

“Your words often belie that. I have noticed that you inevitably denigrate yourself when you compare your actions and performances with those of others. You imply constantly that you should have been better than you were in whatever you do. You take next to no pride in your skills.”

“That’s not true,” Harry argued. “Not all the time. I made a comparison of how I flew to how Connor flies the other day, and it was complimentary to me. And I must have done it at other times in the past.”

“Then change ‘inevitably’ to ‘almost always,’” Snape said, unable to prevent a certain note of dryness from entering his voice. “It does not change what is happening, and I will not allow you to get out of this on a technicality. Think about it, Harry. How many other people would have been able to save a friend’s life, survive numerous wounds and Death Eater attacks, free their magic, defeat the Dark Lord for the fourth time, save at least half the students at the school, set three dragons free, get the Minister of Magic deposed, gain control of a Daily Prophet reporter, and insure that their guardian was set free in a year?”

“Third time,” said Harry.

Snape blinked. He’d become a bit caught up in his own words, and had lost track of what Harry could possibly be responding to. “What?”

“Third time.” Harry lifted his chin. “I told you, Connor defeated him at the end of our first year at Hogwarts.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “And you choose to ignore everything else on that list,” he said. “This is like you.”

“I don’t like to think about it.” Harry turned away. “Stop talking about it, please.”

“For now,” said Snape, deciding that he couldn’t press his charge too far just yet, but not wanting to lie and tell him that he would drop this, either. “Tomorrow evening—“

“After the Yule Ball, Draco and I have to meet with Lucius.”

Snape frowned. He had forgotten that. “Very well, then. The night after that, you will return here.”

“I will,” said Harry, and gave him a sudden, quick smile. “It’s nice to have you back, sir, even when you talk about uncomfortable things.” He snatched up his wand and his book and let himself out.

Snape closed his eyes, sighed, and went to pour himself a Calming Draught. He was patient. He had set plans in motion before that had taken months to arrive at fruition. He had been a spy for a year. He could do this. It was not too slow. He would break down a few of the barriers that Harry had placed on himself in the end.

His gaze wouldn’t stop going to the three cauldrons in the corner of his office, though. Two were empty now, the insanity potion and the Meleager Potion utterly gone.

The third, full of clear silver like liquid glass, still remained. Harry closed his eyes. He had, try as he might, been unable to come up with a combination of spells that would do exactly as he wanted, so he was trying his best to will Connor’s Christmas gift into existence. Or, at least, the overtly magical part of it. He had Transfigured one of his pillows into a blank book that should hold the magic once it was complete.

The air around him tightened as he imagined what he wanted. He pictured Pensieves—though not without a shudder—and Pansy’s Fey Tale reader and the book of pureblood rituals he had given Draco, and shoved his will into the book.

The magic raced around him twice, and then tightened on his body like a coiling spring. Harry let out his breath in a surprised whoof. He had not realized how much his power would change when he

centered it on and bound it to his body. He didn't think this particular change was a bad thing, though. At least it meant his magic tended to be more obedient than it had been. He opened his eyes to find out if it had obeyed him this time.

It had. Harry grinned slightly as he opened the book to the first page and found a written record of the time he and Connor had found a nest of fairies at the bottom of the garden in Godric's Hollow. The little creatures had been extremely rude, and refused to reveal how they had crossed the wards.

He flipped through the other pages, and nodded. Each record was written "I," from his perspective, and in his handwriting. All of them were carefully chosen. Harry wanted only happy memories in this book. No need to remind Connor of the storms they'd been through.

He put the book carefully aside, and then started when he saw Draco sitting on his own bed and watching him. He'd been alone when he started, but, of course, the magic had consumed him so completely that it wasn't a surprise he hadn't heard the door open and shut.

"Hi, Draco," he said.

"Hi, Harry." Draco lay down on his back and folded his hands behind his head. He kept looking at Harry, though, and his eyes were more intense than they had been since the night Luna had asked Harry to the Ball. Harry frowned and tilted his head. Is he going to say whatever it was she interrupted then? But why now? He's had plenty of chances before.

"Was there something you wanted to tell me?" he ventured after a few minutes.

Draco let out a long breath. "Harry," he said at last, "do you think there's just one person for every wizard and witch out there? That if they fall in love with each other, that's it? They get married—or joined—and spend the rest of their lives with each other?"

Harry snorted. "Of course not. I grew up isolated, Draco, but I could read. I know there are lots of second marriages and divorces, even if

most purebloods don't like to admit to them." This much, he couldn't resist needling his friend about. Draco sometimes had a blindness to the less positive parts of the culture in which he'd been raised.

"But does the mere existence of second marriage and divorces invalidate the idea?" Draco had the pensive, contemplative look on his face that he usually only got when he talked about potions or the pureblood rituals he was learning. "I mean, maybe the right people didn't meet each other until the second marriage, and then they'll stay together for the rest of their lives. And maybe the people who got divorced realized the other spouse or partner wasn't their perfect match, so that was why they divorced them."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think anyone's perfect for another witch or wizard, Draco."

"Why not?" Draco's glare was abruptly of piercing intensity.

Harry blinked. Is this about his crush? Well, that would explain why he's so interested in this, since he thinks it's love.

Harry felt flattered that Draco would choose to talk to him about this, even if it was in an extremely roundabout way. So far as he knew, Draco hadn't breathed a word about his crush to anyone else. So Harry gave him what he really thought, instead of the flippant answer he might have tried to fob him off.

"Because they can't be," he said quietly. "They'd have opposite desires and inclinations and arguments at least some of the time. One person would have to suppress all those differences to really be perfect for the other person, or manufacture the opposing desires and inclinations and arguments that the other person wanted them to have. It would involve crumpling their freedom at least some of the time. I hate the very idea."

Draco opened his mouth, then closed it. Then he said, "But what if that person really does think the other one is perfect just the way he—or she—is?"

“Then he needs to go to St. Mungo’s,” said Harry gently. “And he’s setting himself up for a fall, I think, because what happens if the perfect person changes or makes a mistake?” He shook his head when Draco gave him a frustrated glance. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Draco, but that’s what I truly believe.”

Draco got up, sighed, and left the room. He didn’t seem angry, at least, just frustrated. Harry watched him wistfully. I hope he’s not setting himself up for a fall. Merlin knows, I can’t think of anyone he would believe is perfect, but then, I don’t know who his crush is. Harry sighed and shifted from foot to foot. He’d agreed to meet Luna at the Ravenclaw Tower before the Yule Ball, but he wished he hadn’t. He felt utterly ridiculous in his dress robes. He could perform fine gestures and dances and ceremonies all he liked, he thought, but he just wasn’t cut out to wear finery.

At least the Christmas Day before this had been fun. He’d given Connor the book of memories, and received a book on the history of centaurs from him in return. Draco hadn’t yet given him a gift, but he claimed that was coming this evening, so it could wait. Harry intended to give him his gift then, too, since it wasn’t the kind of thing that could be carried or made beforehand.

James had sent him a Pensieve. Harry hadn’t yet dared to look into it, resulting in a somewhat awkward letter of thanks.

Draco had been reasonable, resigned, it seemed, to the fact that his crush wouldn’t attend the Ball with him. He’d still dressed up as though he were going, so Harry assumed he’d see him there.

“There you are, Harry.”

Harry blinked once as Luna came out of the Tower, and then blinked again. She had on delicate blue robes with silver trim, which would have looked completely normal if not for the bits of silver tinsel also stuck on them. Harry wondered if the tinsel was meant to represent stars, the kind that Dumbledore’s robes often showed, but they were not star-shaped, and if there was any pattern, Harry couldn’t see it. Luna had on a necklace of feathers braided so intricately that Harry

couldn't make out anything but a bristling mass of, well, feather, and her hat had long silver ribbons that curled into her blonde hair, around her ears, under her chin, and sometimes left her hat altogether and explored up and down her neck and shoulders, like serpents.

"You look very noticeable, Luna," said Harry, because he wouldn't give her false gallantry. Luna smiled at him.

"So do you, Harry," she said, and held out another necklace. "Merry Christmas."

Harry ducked his head, embarrassed, so she could put it around his throat. "I'm sorry, Luna. I didn't get anything for you."

Luna gave him a strange glance as she straightened again. "Yes, you did. You're dancing with me and taking me to the Ball."

Harry would have argued that she'd been the one to ask him, but he knew she honestly wouldn't know what he was talking about, so he offered her his arm. "Shall we go downstairs?"

Luna put her hand on his forearm in the three-fingered posture correct for a younger witch letting an older wizard escort her—well, after all, she was pureblood—and glided down the hall beside him. Harry took the opportunity to study the necklace she'd given him out of the corner of his eye.

"Luna," he said after a moment.

"Yes, Harry?" She glanced up at him, her face utterly serene.

"What kind of teeth are these?" They didn't look like any he'd seen before, even as ingredients in advanced potions. They had delicate spindles rising from a flat base, and ended in four tiny, jagged spikes, as if the teeth had smaller teeth inside them.

"Hippogriff teeth," said Luna.

"But hippogriffs don't have teeth," said Harry.

“They do,” said Luna. “If you look. They take out their teeth by the light of the full moon and hide them away, so that people can use them for necklaces and charms. But you can only find them if you’re looking for them, and for that purpose. The hippogriffs don’t want their teeth to be used for anything else.”

Harry hesitated, then decided that he wouldn’t gain much from questioning her. He would feel like he was badgering her, thought of course she would be content to patiently explain anything that he didn’t understand. Besides, why should he worry about it tonight? Tonight was a night for having fun.

He relaxed and smiled. “I never knew that,” he said. “Do they tell you anything? You know, like the chairs about Helga Hufflepuff?”

Luna sniffed. “Not anything interesting. Hippogriff teeth only want to talk about the full moon, and there’s only so many times that you can hear about it rising and setting and waxing and waning before you want something different.”

Harry found himself smiling more widely. She’s probably the best person I could have taken to the Ball. It’s impossible to be self-conscious or worry about my dancing when she’s around. There are so many more interesting things to worry about.

They reached the doors of the Great Hall soon enough, and joined the crowd of students milling outside it. Harry spotted Viktor Krum, who nodded tersely at him. The Durmstrang Champion hadn’t been that happy about Harry apparently upstaging him at the First Task, but he’d made no secret of the fact that he felt a sort of grudging respect as well, and Harry didn’t think the scowl on the other boy’s face had anything to do with him. His date, one of the upper-year Gryffindor girls whom Harry didn’t know very well, kept sneaking glances at him, as if she couldn’t believe she was here with him. Krum ignored her entirely.

Fleur Delacour actually sought him out, smiling at him and tossing her long silver hair. “Ello, Harry,” she murmured. Her gaze took in Luna, and her eyebrows rose, but she didn’t say anything. Harry didn’t think she had grounds to say anything at all, given that her date, Roger

Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, was all but drooling as he looked at her. He had his hand on her arm in the wrong position, as well.

Harry caught the snobbish tone of that thought, and blinked. Since when did I become Draco?

Harry nodded back to Fleur. "Are you looking forward to the dancing?" he asked, since he could think of nothing else to ask her.

Fleur laughed, a sound that increased her beauty. "Of course," she said. "Dancing eez an art in my country. I look forward to showing everyone how it eez done!"

You have an unfair advantage, given your blood, Harry thought, but he murmured something polite that seemed to content Fleur. She led Roger away, absentmindedly moving her sleeve so that he couldn't drool on her robes.

"Hi, Harry."

Harry turned around—Luna was looking in the opposite direction, and for a moment he almost stumbled—to smile at his twin. Connor looked good enough in his red dress robes, though nervous.

Harry blinked when he saw his brother's date. Connor had only winked when Harry asked about her or him, and said that Harry would just have to wait to find out. Harry had, for some reason, imagined that Connor would bring someone from another House, rather than Parvati Patil.

Parvati ducked her head and blushed when she saw Harry looking at her, but she didn't giggle. She was much less annoying when she didn't do that, Harry had to concede. "Hi, Harry, Luna." She didn't appear startled by Luna's robes, and Harry had to give her mental points for that, even if it was probably because Parvati admired Professor Trelawney too much to laugh at strange clothes. "When do you think they're going to let us into the Hall?" She looked imperiously over several people's heads, as though she could command the doors to open by sheer force of will alone.

Connor patted her shoulder. "Probably in a few minutes," he said. His face was soft when he looked at Parvati. Harry blinked again. He had utterly, utterly missed that Connor was crushing on someone, and he looked both pleased and proud to have Parvati here with him.

What else have I missed, I wonder?

"In four minutes," said Luna.

Everyone in the immediate vicinity looked at her.

"In four minutes they'll open the doors," Luna clarified helpfully. "I heard the doors say so."

Connor couldn't quite hide a smile, but Harry was curious. He cast a Tempus charm, checked the time, and decided to wait.

"Where's Ron?" he asked then, since he thought it was odd that Ron wouldn't be at his best friend's right shoulder.

Connor winced. "Um, he came alone," he said. "His date didn't work out."

"It would if he'd asked her the right way," said Parvati primly. "My sister does not enjoy being asked out by someone too angry to get her name right."

"What's he angry about?" Harry asked.

Connor winced again, then abruptly looked over Harry's shoulder and stared. "Because of them," he said. "Oh, Merlin. I rather hoped they'd have the sense not to flaunt it, after everything."

Harry turned around. Blaise Zabini had entered the room, posing, not at all coincidentally, as a flash of light from a charm exploded around him like a camera. He looked good enough, Harry supposed, but his most noteworthy feature was the very pleased smirk that he turned on his date.

Ginny Weasley was on his arm.

"Tell me," Harry muttered to his brother, "was he upset about Ginny dating Blaise, or dating at all?" Ron did sometimes act insanely protective of his younger sister, as though she would shatter if she were dropped. Connor had told him that they'd had a fight at the beginning of the year, before they found out Quidditch was canceled, about Ginny joining the Quidditch team. She wanted to be a Chaser. Ron was worried for her, but he'd chosen to phrase it as "You can't play!" That argument had lasted for a while, and this was one that was almost certain to be worse, to judge by the mulish expression on Ginny's face as Blaise guided her into the room.

Connor sighed. "It started out with Blaise," he said. "Then it went through boys, who Ron apparently thinks are lining up to push Ginny into a wall and snog her senseless. I think it ended somewhere around how Ron doesn't want her dating a 'slimy Slytherin.'"

"Bad, then," Harry surmised.

Connor closed his eyes and gave a tight little nod. "And Ron got worse when Padma wouldn't go out with him because he forgot her name and shouted at her."

"She was totally within her rights," said Parvati coolly.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that," Connor hastened to reassure her. "I just meant that—"

"Welcome, students, to the Yule Ball," announced Professor McGonagall, as the doors swung open.

Harry cast the Tempus charm again, and shook his head. "It's four minutes later," he told Luna. "You were right."

Luna eyed him. "I wasn't right. The doors were right."

Harry smiled in spite of himself.

Draco was trying to decide if being at the Yule Ball without Harry was worse than staying in their room would have been. So far, he hadn't come to any definite conclusions.

On the one hand, of course, he could watch, and see that Harry didn't get groped by anyone else, and he had the great pleasure of seeing that Harry sat out at least half the dances, talking to Loony.

On the other hand, he was talking to Loony. And plenty of other people were looking at him, not that Harry noticed, the prat.

He doesn't notice the people looking at him like that in his own room. Why would he see it now?

Draco wished the professors allowed any drink stronger than butterbeer. It wasn't that he'd had a lot of opportunity to get drunk on wine, as opposed to taste it, but at least he wouldn't be coherent enough to feel miserable. Besides, nothing could possibly make him feel worse than he did right now.

"Draco."

Is there some Fate assigned to listen to me and make my life worse whenever I think something like that?

Draco turned around and nodded tersely to Blaise. "Zabini," he said, and watched Blaise smirk at him.

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" Blaise leaned past Draco to pick up one of the mince pies from the table behind him. Draco had chosen to stand near the food, since it was relatively central and let him see Harry even when he was dancing. "No need to be bitter, Malfoy, just because I got my crush to dance with me and yours doesn't even notice that you exist."

"The Weasel's little sister," Draco said, feeling glad that Blaise had given him the excuse to dip his tongue in acid. "Oh, yes, that's a conquest, all right."

Blaise just shrugged at him. "She's pretty," he said. "I like her. She makes me laugh. And that she'll tell her brother to sod off so she can date me is kind of a turn-on. Meanwhile, you claim to have this great, burning, blazing love for Harry, and all you do is moon after him and glare at anyone who touches him too often. I told you, you've got to tell him." Blaise paused, licking his fingers; Draco heroically refrained from commenting on this appalling lack of taste. "Or someone else could tell him," Blaise added. "Like me, for example."

Draco had drawn his wand before he realized what was happening. Blaise laughed, but couldn't quite mask the widening of his eyes.

"I've finally taken part of your stupid advice," Draco growled, when he could speak. "I know Harry's not like a normal person, and so I've got to treat him differently. But he's not going to take it well, or even understand it, if the time's not right. So shut it, Blaise, or I can make sure you shut it more permanently. I know the Vanishing Mouth Hex, you know."

Blaise's mouth dropped open in spite of himself; then he shut it as though he thought Draco might choose to cast the hex right then. "You do not," he said. "That's Dark Arts."

Draco sighed. "Zabini, think about what my father was, please."

Blaise studied him for a moment more, then shrugged. "Fine. He won't hear it from me. But you can't have everything just as you like, Malfoy." His eyes were shining with spite, which was fine with Draco; he preferred it to what Blaise was pleased to call "humor." "Someone is going to tell him one of these days. Or take a chance on him themselves, you know. Pansy fancies him, a bit."

Draco could well believe it. "But not today, she won't," he said, glancing over to where Pansy was dancing with Montague.

"Not today," Blaise acknowledged. "But soon enough."

Draco turned his back on him loftily. "Soon enough" was not "today." "Sometimes objects are influenced by what's going on around them in the present," Luna was explaining as Harry led her back to the floor

for a third dance. "The floor is talking about dances right now, because that's what people are doing on it right now."

Harry nodded slowly. As much as he could understand Luna's peculiar gift, which appeared to be a kind of empathy tuned to objects alone, that made sense to him. "Are they telling you about any particular ones?"

Luna laughed gently as Harry spun her through the first measure of the music. She barely moved when she was dancing, letting Harry's hands guide her, but her ribbons made up for it, writhing excitedly around her head and trailing behind her, like her hair, when she turned around. "They're remembering the time Salazar Slytherin danced with Rowena Ravenclaw. He only did it once, because he said that she stepped on his feet. Just to show him, she didn't step on his feet once the whole dance, and then told him she'd never dance with him again. He sulked for a week."

Harry cocked his head to the side as he and Luna briefly parted and then came back together again, only their fingertips touching this time. This dance wasn't one he'd practiced often, but he could watch the other dancers from a corner of his eye, and this was a variation on one he'd read about, so he could get through it without embarrassing himself. "The memories you've been telling me about are almost all from the Founders' time. Do the floors and the walls and the furniture remember them best?"

"They loved them," said Luna simply. She halted in place, turned in a half-circle, and bowed to the couple next to them, who, Harry was amused to see, were Hermione and Zacharias. "They built Hogwarts, after all. Of course Hogwarts is going to love them."

"What's she babbling about now?" Zacharias looked extremely irritated as he stepped out of the dance to take his place as Luna's temporary partner. Harry, moving across from Hermione, was about to retort, but Luna got there before he could.

"Do you have clumsy feet?" she asked, frowning at him. "The floor is complaining because it says you step too heavily."

Harry muffled his laughter in his sleeve as Zacharias shut up and retreated into proper pureblood coolness, leading Luna through the steps that she and Harry had just performed, in reverse order. Harry offered his hand to Hermione, and she nodded at him and slid easily into place. She's probably studied this, Harry thought, as Hermione refused to make a stumble, even when he did.

"You look lovely," he complimented her, because it was true. Hermione had gone to some trouble with the cosmetic charms that girls like Parvati used far more often. She'd straightened her hair, too, and Harry did wonder why she'd done that. Curls were perfectly fine. "And I'm sorry for what Luna said to Zacharias. I hope that he won't take it out on you."

"Thank you," said Hermione. "And he deserved it. He's been a perfect gentleman to me all evening, but Merlin, he's an idiot sometimes." She rolled her eyes as she and Harry wheeled apart from each other in the finger-touching motion. "Did you know he told me, in all seriousness, that he doesn't see what purpose most of the pureblood dances serve, because anyone worth a Sickle knows he's more intelligent than they are?"

Harry snorted, and changed it to a cough as Zacharias glanced over suspiciously at them. "That sounds like him," he said.

Hermione nodded with a frown. "That's the thing I like and despise about him most, really." She leaned back, and Harry spun her. "It's refreshing to be with someone who knows what I'm talking about and doesn't make fun of me for studying all the time, but he thinks that makes us better than other people. When I try to say that no, it doesn't, he has very logical arguments on why it does."

"I have to admit, I'm glad that I'm not dating him," Harry said, and guided Hermione through the first steps of the dance. It was harder than it looked, doing them backward, and both of them had to concentrate. "Good luck, I suppose."

“Thank you.” Hermione nodded to him and moved back to Zacharias, who took her arm possessively the moment she came up next to him. They started what sounded like a muffled argument, in which Harry caught “different perspective on the world” several times in the course of a minute.

Not sure if I should wish her good luck or not, Harry thought with something between a grimace and a smile as he and Luna turned to face the next couple, Padma Patil and the girl she’d brought, whom Harry thought was named Marietta something. Happiness might be a better bet.

“Harry?”

Harry glanced up. Luna had just finished the mince pie he’d brought her from the food table—he’d nodded to Draco as he’d retrieved it, since Draco appeared to be standing guard over the food, and Draco had brightened considerably—and he wondered if she wanted to dance again.

“I’m going back to the Tower,” she said, and smiled at him. “Thank you for dancing with me. I loved it.”

Harry frowned. “Wait, Luna, let me take you—“

Luna shook her head. “You need to get to your meeting.”

Harry stared at her.

Luna gave him a patient smile. “Harry,” she said, “the walls told me.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek, then wandered towards the door. Harry stood up to watch her go, at least partially to make sure that no one thought it would be funny to trip her or snatch one of the ribbons from her hat.

That was how he happened to have a direct line-of-sight view of Ron yelling at Ginny and Blaise, his face red as a radish, though Harry couldn’t catch everything he said in the general buzz of music and talk. From what Connor had told him, “slimy Slytherin” would figure quite prominently. Harry frowned. If I went over there and challenged

him to repeat that to me, would he? Would he have cared if Ginny had asked me?

He also got to see Ginny draw her wand from inside one lacy sleeve and cast a spell at Ron. It hit him squarely, and he paused for a moment, then clawed frantically at his nose.

Harry knew what hex she'd used when a bat began attacking Ron's face. Harry rolled his eyes. Bat-Bogey. Well, he got what was coming to him. If he'd just shut up about it in public, I don't think Ginny would have felt the need to do that.

The use of magic caused most people to fall silent and stare, so Harry could easily hear Professor McGonagall's shocked, "Miss Weasley!" and Ginny's disgusted, "I suppose that you want to be known as the Boy Who Lived To Be An Immature Prat, then."

She turned sharply away from Ron and took Blaise's arm again. Blaise was grinning like an idiot, Harry saw. Ron was already out the door.

Harry caught Draco's eye and tilted his head. Draco nodded and came over to him. "My father said he would meet us beyond the rose gardens," he murmured. "I know a side door that goes there without passing through the places where everyone'll be snogging."

Harry nodded back, and followed him. Most people were too involved in laughing or dancing to notice them, and the professors seemed focused on the drama of McGonagall attempting to get Ginny to stop dancing with Blaise so she could scold her properly.

Draco led Harry to a far corner of the Great Hall and slipped out a door that Harry had noticed before, but supposed vaguely must be for house elves or something. In a moment, they were out in the rose gardens, and Harry shook his head and sniffed in gratitude. Much as he'd enjoyed listening to Luna, the Hall had been growing too hot, and too filled with stares, for his comfort.

“This way,” Draco whispered, and they slipped off among the rosebushes, avoiding any places that giggled.

Harry felt his mind calming and becoming cooler as if to match the air, though he cast a few warming charms on his face so that his cheeks wouldn't get the same idea. He was absolutely sure that he knew what Lucius was going to ask for. Luckily, it wasn't something he was at all reluctant to grant. He wondered what else the end of the truce-dance would involve beyond the exchange of gifts, though. Most books didn't talk much about that, as if afraid they would profane something so sacred with their words.

“Here we are.”

Harry blinked and looked up. They'd reached the wall of the garden, and Draco was running a hand along the stone, his face seeming all frown in the faint light from the Great Hall. “Yes,” he said after a moment. “Here it is. Father and Mother used to use this way to sneak out of the school in his seventh year.”

“Why?” Harry asked, thinking that it would have been easier to go through the Entrance Hall.

Draco gave him a swift look, and his voice turned dry. “Harry, believe me, I really wasn't interested in asking.”

Harry flushed. “That wasn't what I meant,” he muttered, but Draco was already tugging at the gate.

A moment later, he muttered, “What the hell?”

Harry came up beside him, glad to have something to think about other than Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy sneaking out of Hogwarts. “What do you mean?” he asked, but when he laid his hand on the gate, he realized what it must be. There was a powerful magical force holding it shut, and it didn't feel like a ward or a shield. It felt like the result of a ritual. Harry pushed at it.

A question formed in his mind—not spoken, but written, as though someone were actively reaching into and writing it on his thoughts. Do you wish to pass?

Harry blinked. Yes, he answered, wondering if it could really be that simple.

You are certain?

I am.

There is no longer a prohibition?

There is not, Harry replied, wondering if perhaps this was a spell put on the school to discourage people from coming in during the war with Voldemort.

A wind appeared to sigh, and the words were wiped out of his mind. Harry nodded to Draco, and Draco pulled the gate open.

A single figure waited beyond the gate for them. Harry could make out it was a witch from the shape of the robes, and hesitated. He hadn't realized Narcissa would be there.

Draco took a step forward. "Mum—"

The woman cast the hood of her cloak back and rolled her sleeves at the same time, sending a small globe filled with light into one of her palms, so that they could see her face. When he saw it, Harry was certain that the light had already been lit, as she could not have managed the spell.

Lily gazed at him, and said, "Hello, Harry."

Chapter Thirty-Eight: A Dark Lord Will Be Along Any Minute Now

Albus looked down from the window in his office, charmed to reflect the view of the gate through the rose-gardens as it was at the moment, and waited, and hoped.

He had thought of having Lily come to the school long before, but it was not until he had begun listening seriously to the wards of Hogwarts, which he usually ignored unless there was a diamond-hard reason not to, that he realized what an opportunity Lucius Malfoy's visit represented. He had been aware when the Dark wizards visited Harry on Halloween night, but he hadn't bothered to listen to their conversations through the wards, sure he would hear only Slytherin games that they played with the poor unsuspecting boy. But when the wards reported to him that Harry and Draco Malfoy were speaking of his father's second visit, Albus's interest had been peaked.

Then Draco, in a private conversation with Severus, had mentioned that Lucius would wait outside the gate in the rose-gardens that he had used when he was a student at the school, and that he would be there on the night of the Yule Ball.

Albus had seen his opportunity.

He had had Lily send a letter to her son, with a warning in it if he had cared to read it, but he suspected Harry wouldn't—and even if he had, his only chance to avoid this confrontation would have been to come to the Headmaster at once and have it in Albus's office instead. He had told Lily to wait at the rose-garden gate until Harry came through, to provide a barrier between her and Harry that would let the justice ritual try to prevent them from seeing each other. Harry would remove the prohibition so that he and Draco could get through the gate, and then the rest would be simple enough.

Lucius, meanwhile, was somewhat occupied with the trees of the Forbidden Forest, which Albus had stirred unexpectedly to life when he passed them—such feats were not beyond the Headmaster of Hogwarts, though they tired him and he preferred to accomplish his ends through subtler means—and would not be along for some time. Severus had agreed to let Harry go to the meeting alone.

Albus had not anticipated that the young Malfoy heir would be with Harry, somehow having missed that detail, but he would not let it bother him. Harry would have no choice about speaking to Lily now.

And when he heard what she had to say, he would have no choice about surrendering, either.

Albus settled back, tightened his control on the trees, and watched the drama playing out below, which would change and affect the fate of the wizarding world in leading Harry back more closely to the Light. Harry felt his heart throbbing so hard that he shook. He couldn't move, couldn't think of what to do, couldn't concentrate on anything but the sensation of his heart in his ears, it was so overwhelming.

Then he felt a second sensation—Draco's hand slipping into his.

And though he would have preferred to face Lily alone, in his fear of what would emerge now, Harry grasped the hand and squeezed back.

"Harry?" Lily's face remained grave and quiet as she held the light-globe higher so that she could see him, but her voice echoed her disappointment. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

Harry swallowed, intending the gesture to take his nervousness with it. He didn't think he succeeded, but he only sounded as if he'd been kicked in the stomach when he spoke, instead of half-disemboweled. "Not particularly, no. I said that I never wanted to communicate with you again. How much more of a hint can you take?"

"But you responded to my first letter." Lily moved a step forward, the hem of her robe sweeping the ground. Harry could not control the urge to take a step back, and Draco immediately moved close to his side and angled half in front of him, as if he would protect Harry at all costs from his own mother. "And you did not say that you wished never to communicate again in your last response. You only asked about right now. And a mother never gives up her children, Harry. It's been a year. I think that's long enough. Why can't I see you again, especially now that you have given your consent to that?" Her voice

had turned into the same sort of gentle scolding that Harry remembered from nights when he was proud of something he had done and wanted to tell Connor about it. She shouldn't have had to remind him to keep his training secret, but she did, sometimes.

She shouldn't have had to remind you how much she loves you, either.

"No, Harry," said Draco sharply.

Harry turned his eyes from his mother's face to his friend's, though it was hard. Draco had been too shocked to say anything at first—his face still showed pale in Lily's light—but his eyes were rapidly filling with tears. He reached out and grasped Harry's throat, hard enough to hurt.

"I know what your guilt feels like," he breathed. "It fills my mouth with oil. And I won't let you feel it, Harry. I won't. You have nothing to feel guilty for. She treated you horribly, and she deserves everything she got." He turned and glanced over his shoulder at Lily, and Harry shivered. He hadn't known that Draco could feel such hatred as his expression said he did. "And I know you won't believe this," he muttered, "but she deserves worse than that."

"I don't see that you have any place here." Lily pointed off to the side. "This is between myself and my son. Go."

"No," said Draco, and this time shoved Harry completely behind him, so that he could face Lily. "You've torn your son apart and scattered his heart to the four winds, the way that Gerra did with Aries Black. You don't deserve to be anywhere near him. I'm going to give you twenty seconds to leave before I cast one of the Unforgivables." He drew his wand. "One. Two."

"You can't cast the Unforgivables yet," said Lily. "You're not old enough." As if in a dream, Harry saw her reach into her pocket, but he didn't know what she could be taking out. She couldn't use a wand anymore, given her Muggle state. "And I told you before that you don't have any place in a confrontation between myself and my son."

My beloved son, whom I haven't met for a year and a day." She gestured to the left with her chin. "Leave, Malfoy."

"Five. Six."

Lily's hand clenched around whatever it was in her pocket.

Harry took a deep breath. He appreciated Draco's defense of him, but he couldn't let him suffer, just in case Lily did have a magical weapon with her that she could still use, like the light-globe, because it didn't require any innate magic. And he didn't want Draco to hurt his mother, either.

The emotions churned in him, knife-edged and ice-edged, but he knew his overmastering impulse. He wanted his parents to go away. If they chose never to acknowledge him again, if they never sent him another letter, if they simply ignored his existence, then he would be satisfied and do the same for them. He did not want them discussed, or punished, or hurt. What they had done was done. Harry knew them, knew what they could do now, and he pitied them. There was no reason that he need do anything else.

"Draco," he said, tugging on his arm.

Draco turned his head to look at him, but said, "She's still not gone. Fifteen. Sixteen."

Lily's hand rose out of her pocket, moving, tossing something at Draco.

Harry had always been a good Seeker, and he thanked Merlin for it now as he rose in a gentle leap and caught the flying object before it could come anywhere near Draco's face, its likely target. He felt warmth in his palm, and then a sharp sting that coursed up his arm. He grimaced. It was not as bad as the bite of the spiders last year that had incapacitated him badly enough to need the hospital wing, but it hurt.

Harry turned his hand over enough to see what the thing was, but could make out only a shattered red shell before Draco said, with a coldness that belonged in his father's voice and not his own, "Crucio."

No spell flew, though Harry did see a gleam of something around Draco's wand. He jerked to his feet, disregarding the fact that it would already have been too late if Draco's curse had really worked. Lily laughed softly.

"You don't hate me enough to cast that curse on me," she told Draco. "Could it be that you really understand how matters stand between my son and I?" She paused for a moment and cocked her head to the side. "You have a mother of your own. Can you imagine what she would feel if someone tried to interfere with your reconciliation with her?"

Draco didn't bother answering her, as if he thought Lily's words not worth answering. He came over to Harry and turned his hand over, demanding, "Let me see."

A moment later, he shrieked and swatted hard. Harry looked down as bits of red shell fell to the ground, and blinked. Still-Beetle. Of course. I should have realized it. We've used the shells in Potions before.

Then he went completely still, paralyzed along the path of the shell's venom. Draco tugged at his arm, but Harry didn't even sway. Lily let out an annoyed breath and came a few steps nearer to him.

"Harry," she said softly. "I suppose this is one way of getting you to listen. Just listen."

Harry couldn't do anything but stare at her, but Draco made a sound somewhere between a snarl and a moan and lifted his wand.

Lily lobbed something else at him. Harry couldn't turn his head to follow the path of the trajectory and see what it was, and though he struggled, his wandless magic was as much affected by the stillness as the rest of him was, since he'd bound it to his body. He heard the muffled thump of Draco slumping to the ground, and hoped that he would be all right.

"There," said Lily. "Albus gave those to me just in case I encountered any resistance on the way, but really, I didn't think I'd have to use one of them on your friend. We were supposed to meet alone." She stared hard at Harry for a moment, and then her voice softened. "I hoped I wouldn't have to use one on you, either. I wrote you in my letter that I was coming."

Harry had never read the letter. He tried to convey that with his eyes, since he didn't have any other way to say it. This was worse than the stillness caused by the Body-Bind spell. At least there, he knew movement was possible, if someone else levitated or dragged him. This felt as if he were rooted to the ground.

"Finally, we can speak without interruption." Lily took a deep breath. "Harry, I know that I haven't been the best of mothers. But I have made you what you are, and for that, you owe me a hearing."

"I did what I did for the sake of the wizarding world surviving the second war with Voldemort. You know that. I don't need to explain my reasoning to you. But I have thought of a new way to phrase it since that you might appreciate: if Voldemort wins, everything about the wizarding world dies, not just Connor. Your allies will die, since they are no longer loyal to him, and he does not tolerate anything but instant obedience. Your friends will die. Your guardian will die. Your House will be trampled into the mud, tainted with darkness everlasting, and if you think people speak badly of Slytherin now, you don't want to hear what they'll say when the Light wins again. Slytherin would be synonymous with evil, and no one would ever be Sorted into that House again. I think they'd dissolve it, or close Hogwarts, rather than allow anyone else to go into the House of the Snake."

"That means that everything new you've found in life would be destroyed. And that's unacceptable for you, I would think." She paused as if expecting some response from him, some nod or word, but then seemed to remember he was stilled. She shook her head and went on. Harry was pleading with her in his head to shut up, while his magic raced around inside the barrier of the stillness looking for some way out, but she couldn't hear him.

"It's unacceptable to the boy I raised, I know, the boy who loved Connor and who's transferred that love elsewhere. And that means that we have to build a new relationship, you and me and Albus. We're the only ones who truly understand the meaning of sacrifice, Harry. He's made the hard decisions that are needed to win this war. I've made hard decisions of my own. And you've walked the most difficult way."

Lily put out one hand and smoothed it gently over his hair, making Harry's scalp feel as if it were crawling with insects. "We'll need Connor, but he won't ever understand the meaning of sacrifice the way we do. I regret that. If I'd known he was a potential savior in the prophecy, I would have raised him that way. He would have understood that he might die, and what heroism and sacrifice and hard roads meant. But it's too late to recover him now. Albus has been testing him, but he doesn't think he's really made of the best stuff."

Harry thought he felt a finger twitch, and sent his magic down to it as hard as he could. But the motion wasn't repeated. He remembered Snape saying of Still-Beetles that they used to be used to bind powerful Dark wizards while they awaited their trials. Usually, the courtroom was built around them. He could understand why, now. Movement was becoming a foreign concept to him.

"You're the best choice for savior," said Lily, her eyes soft. "But Albus knows that pushing you into the forefront of the world would just make you uncomfortable. You haven't dealt well with the attention that you've received from your exploits so far, have you? No, you haven't. That's the boy I raised. So we'll leave Connor as the Boy-Who-Lived, and bring you back behind the scenes and behind the shadows. It'll be different, I promise. You'll have all my love, and all my attention. Wouldn't you like that, Harry? We'll build a relationship, and we'll reconcile with James, and it will be like what it was in Godric's Hollow—except better, because this time you'll be at the center of things, and not just pushed off into the shadows." Her face was glowing with love and hope.

Harry could feel what it would be like, and the picture was horribly tempting to one part of him. Last year, when Connor was fighting him and his father was missing and his guilt over what he had done to his mother was at its peak, he didn't think he could have resisted the temptation.

But he had changed, even if his mother wanted to pretend that he hadn't. He couldn't give up the friends he had, the allies he'd made, the promises he wanted to keep and the vates duties that he loved most out of all the roads he had to walk. He couldn't give up Draco, and he couldn't give up Snape. He wanted someone who would love him without any other obligations, he couldn't deny that, and there was no doubt that he would understand the kind of household Lily was talking about better than he had ever understood his own clumsy attempts to live a normal life. There was familiarity in that, knowledge that could breed longing.

But that was the only safety it offered, and what he had said under Veritaserum was true. He didn't feel safe with James and Lily, and he sincerely believed that he never would again.

His eyes must have conveyed his rejection, because Lily began abruptly to cry.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "Albus told me—and your letters said—" She blinked, and the tears fell from her eyes and tracked down her face, glimmering in the light of the globe she held. "Your letters said that you understood what I'd done for you, that you were what I made you."

Yes. I said that. But I've still changed, even if I have a bigger circle of people to care for now than Connor. And your skills let me lure in more people like that.

Lily took a deep breath. "Forgive me, Harry," she said. "You'll understand when I'm done why I must say such cutting words, harder than any words I've had to say before."

She rose, and her face assumed a look that would have made Harry flinch if he could move. That look was from the Bad Days, as he

called them in his imagination. Those were the days when he said or did something that convinced Lily he didn't realize that his first duty was always to be to Connor, and she had to speak the truths she normally hid behind soft words.

"You are what I made you," Lily whispered. "You are all that I made you. Harry. Every bit of knowledge you have, every bit of skill that you possess, came from me. Your inborn magic is something that I can't take credit for, of course, and neither are the unnatural additions that Voldemort made to it." She paused, then mused aloud, "Yes, you know about that now, so I can tell you.

"I was so pleased with you when you were born, Harry. And Connor too, of course, but in those days we didn't know that there was to be any substantial difference between you, so I felt proud of you both just the same. And I played with you and sang to you and laughed with you and nursed you, and thought that I would never be happier than I was just then, with my two perfect children."

Perfection is an illusion, Harry thought, in a desperate attempt to find something that would let him release his magic or distract him from Lily's words. One that you and Draco share.

"And then Albus told me about what we must do, and I was devastated, but what could I do?" Lily drew in a breath thick with tears. "We had to do it, for the good of the world. Albus had taught James and me about sacrifice when we were still students at school, and we'd seen a good bit of it when we fought with the Order of the Phoenix. We couldn't fail to do our part.

"We came back after that night, and even before Albus told me what I had to do, I knew. You were different from your brother now, Harry. I could feel the increased magic around you. It was frightening. It was alien; no baby was supposed to have magic that strong, and you hadn't been born with it, which is the natural, correct, proper way for magic to come into the world." She swallowed. "And it was perverse, Harry. Filthy. It was like bathing in dog vomit every time I was near you."

Harry couldn't close his eyes, couldn't turn them from her. All he could do was stand there and feel as if his mind were lacerated, while his magic raced screaming around his body.

"You've never felt it," Lily whispered. "You live in the midst of it, and you can't feel how it affects other people. But, believe me, all the reactions you get have disgust at the bottom. They might be morbid fascination, or a temptation to see how deep the perversion runs, or an attraction to that kind of obscenity, because their magic feels the same way. But it's never because they admire your magic. I'm sorry if they've told you so. They don't know its true nature, then, or they want to console you and make you feel better, or they want something from you. But you are another Voldemort since your magic was released from the phoenix web."

Harry's sight dimmed as he remembered the justice ritual that Voldemort had corrupted in May, attempting to use it to drain his magic from Harry. His power was what the Dark Lord had wanted. Could there really be a doubt that it was dirty, then, and not just plentiful? Would Voldemort have an attraction to anything that was inherently pure and of the Light?

And if he was another Voldemort, then did that mean that he would do the same kinds of things as Voldemort did someday, attacking children and corrupting ancient pureblood rituals into his service?

"But my training took that away," said Lily. "It made you safe, for a long time. You didn't use the filthy part of your magic. You used the clean part, the natural part, with just a bit of the filth leaking in from time to time, and being cleansed as it came, like offal being washed in a flowing stream. Had the bindings on your magic lasted until the time of your last year at Hogwarts, or even a bit earlier, then the darkness would have all turned to light.

"But it didn't, and now you're full of the vomit again, and whatever good is in you—the history that you know, the love that you have for your brother and other people, the skills that I taught you to defend and heal—you owe to me. Without me, you would have been another Voldemort by the time you were six."

Harry tried to swallow, and the Still-Beetle venom prevented that. It didn't prevent blinking, but it prevented everything else, and the screaming mental chaos in his head, which felt as though it were ripping apart his rationalizations piece by piece, was not still enough.

What if she's right? It's true that most of the people who've professed to like and follow you are only doing it because of things that Lily instilled in you. You would have nothing to offer them if not for your knowledge and your talents, and the sheer power of your magic is something unnatural. Peter called you Voldemort's magical heir, the heir of the worst Dark Lord of this century. Who wants that? Who will follow that? Who will follow what you are, if it's all true? Who would like you or love you or pay you deference, if they knew what Lily knows?

"I can still love you, Harry," Lily whispered. "I know it all, and still I love you, and still I won't turn from you in disgust. We can cleanse the darkness from you. We can wash you in absolute, utter, shining purity. A mother's love, and a father's, too, can do that, you know."

What if she's right? What soul do you have that she did not give you? After all, who loves or likes or approves of someone like you without some kind of external reason to do so? And she was the one who taught you to love unconditionally, to accept anything from others—that same forgiveness they're willing to become your allies for—and taught you to sacrifice—something the others refuse to understand, and indeed say is wrong. No, she won't make you safe, but she'll make you honest. No one else has told you any of this. Draco and Snape either know it and keep you in the dark because of it, because they want to protect you, or they don't know it and they'll be shocked and appalled beyond reason to find out what you are. Draco's probably appalled, lying there right now and listening to it. How could you have thought that you were the kind of person who was really capable of receiving the kind of love they wanted to give? Not the Dark Lord's magical heir, full of the power that the Dark Lord learned from obscenity and murder.

"It'll be better when you're back at Godric's Hollow, Harry," Lily whispered coaxingly. "There's no one there but people who want to help you, people whose purity you can bathe in. There's no one as

perverse and cruel there as Voldemort is, or as your friend on the ground is.”

It took Harry a moment to work out that she was talking about Draco.

Draco isn't perverse and cruel.

The truth froze the chaos inside his mind, and then cracked it, piece by piece, like black ice. What roared up from beneath that, silent, was the same dark rage that had come over him when he confronted Umbridge and Fudge in the Minister's interrogation room.

She has no right to say that about him.

The explosion of his magic cracked the Still-Beetle venom and made his body wrench violently as it flew out of him. Harry had it under control in a moment, though, because it was his own, just like his rage. As it circled his body, he wondered if it was true that it felt filthy and corrupt to other people.

And then he didn't care, because he was focusing on Lily, and hearing again what she had said about Draco, a horrible lie in a welter of might-be-truths, and she was lying, and she had to know she was lying, and she had no right to say that, and he wanted to make her hurt.

This time, the snake didn't flow from his body. It grew on the grass behind Lily, and it lunged forward, closing its jaws around her foot. It had no need to crush her ankle, or pump poison into her. Where it bit, the ankle was simply and suddenly gone, cut away from her body as smoothly as though she had been born without one.

Lily let out a cry and collapsed to the ground, her foot clinging to her leg by the barest strip of flesh. She stared up at him, and her fear made her eyes greener. Harry found that he admired the effect. He moved a few steps forward, never looking away from her face, though his mind was busy deciding where his snake, which was swaying behind Lily in silent obedience to his wishes, should strike next.

It was so simple, here, so wild. He understood what the music he'd heard on the thestral's back had been singing about. Why not give himself to the Dark? He could have all the filthy magic that he liked then, and no one would care. And Dark Lords and Ladies were famous for not giving a damn if anyone loved them, so he wouldn't have to worry about whether or not everyone around him was lying to him, at least lies of omission. And he could do whatever he wanted to people who were like Lily, and wanted to hurt Draco or Snape or Connor or someone else he cared about.

"Harry."

Because the voice was not a shout, because it was low and not raised, Harry stopped, and turned around. Snape was coming across the grass towards them.

Snape had seen the boys leave the Ball for their meeting, and he had not gone after them. He had no desire to meet Lucius or Narcissa, should she be there. He would wait until midnight and then fetch Draco and Harry if they weren't back, but otherwise, he trusted them to handle themselves.

He first knew his mistake when the strongest explosion of Dark magic he'd ever felt burst free beyond the walls, and sent him to his knees.

He stood up again as soon as he could, though his mind was oppressed as though with a cloud and his knees wobbled. His mind and his ears both echoed with screams. The last came from students and professors who had any magical sensitivity, confused and frightened. The first came from magic in the area, as it turned tortured with the hatred and pain of a powerful wizard.

Harry can swallow magic. It's already moving towards him.

Not that he ever really doubted that the Dark magic was Harry, of course. If Voldemort had returned, the Mark on his arm would already be burning.

He staggered out of the Hall by the same door the boys had taken—in the opposite direction from all the other professors, who were trying

to herd the students to safety—and towards the gate Draco had told him about, moving mechanically. The garden was full of frightened and crying children, some of them clutching each other for comfort. Snape ignored all of them, though he forced away one young girl who would have clung to his robes with a snarl. He was trying to save all their lives by getting to Harry.

Not really, his conscience, which had been suspiciously active the last few days, pointed out. You're really trying just to save Harry.

Snape shrugged to himself and pushed open the gate.

It was worse the closer he was to it. Snape could feel the Darkness of this magic now. It was not deceptive, nor especially solitary, nor compulsive. It was wild—at once the definition of Dark that probably made the most sense, and the most dangerous. This was the kind of wildness that would strike at friends as well as foes, if the wild creature was hurt enough.

Snape came out of the gate, and recognized the woman lying on the ground, and saw Draco insensible, and saw black fire burning on Harry's body, dancing up and down the skin.

"Harry." He murmured the name, but it would be enough, and started walking towards Harry. It was the bravest thing he had ever done in his life, he thought.

Harry turned.

His eyes were utterly feral. He had some control left, given the way he could focus on Snape, but that wasn't long for this world. And then, Snape thought, almost amazed he could be so calm while thinking this, neither would they be.

He stopped well short of Harry. He had often thought his charge was like a wild animal, the way he flinched and shied from most gestures of affection. He would use the same mindset now to coax him.

"Harry," he repeated. Then he drew his wand. Harry tensed, and the black fire on his arms reached out, flickering. Snape could feel its

coldness from here, and sense the way the air surged towards it. Whatever went into that blackness would not come out again.

Snape laid his wand on the ground. Then he knelt beside it—both knees, without the one-kneel gesture that would show deference and might enrage Harry by its nearness to the gesture given Light Lords—and held out his arms.

He saw a fine tremor enter the black fire around Harry, even if Harry himself wasn't shaking. The gesture awakened memories in him, then, memories of the Wizengamot's courtroom. That was what Snape was counting on.

He drove away anger and confusion and hatred as he met Harry's gaze. There was already enough of that in the boy who needed a step or two more to become a Dark Lord. He took a deep breath, because this was hard for him, too, but his surliness about showing his emotions could not be allowed to rule his mood now, and let himself show his love.

Harry shuddered so hard that for a moment, Snape thought he would sink to the ground.

Then a movement off to the side drew his attention. Draco had recovered from whatever weapon Lily had used on him, and had rolled over to one side. He froze when he saw Harry, but his expression in the light was not the terror that Snape himself had feared. He simply gave Harry the look he'd been giving him lately, the one that combined ferocity and pride and love, and waited.

Harry closed his eyes.

Snape waited. They both waited, and for an intolerable moment, the air outside the garden was tight with magic and expectation.

Harry had been prepared to destroy—not only Lily, but his relationship with everyone else left behind him. Why not? It was all lies anyway. Or maybe not, but he couldn't trust them again. How could he trust them? The fact that his rage had come out like this, that he wanted to hurt people, only meant he couldn't be trusted, and no one would want to be friends with someone who was a sadist like

Bellatrix. He might as well step away now and make all their dislikes come true.

And Snape and Draco were both waiting, and not running, or calling him names, or casting binding curses on him.

But she said—

But they were there.

But your magic is filthy—

But they were there.

But you know that she could be right—

But they were there.

But you weren't born with your magic—

But they were there.

Harry's mind kept bringing up words, and every time, they collapsed before the implacable actions that Snape and Draco kept presenting him with.

With a little cry, he pulled his magic back inside his body. His rage was not so easy to lock away, but he kept his back turned on his mother and his focus trained on Snape and Draco.

One mentor and one friend. They both loved him, for whatever wild and stupid reasons they had, and he could not prove them wrong, after all.

He swallowed, and crept back towards Draco. Draco was on his feet in an instant, hugging him, gently. He didn't hold hard enough that Harry might be tempted to break free. Harry lifted his arms and held him back, desperately.

Snape's hands came down on his shoulders then, and he murmured, "What shall I do with her?"

"Send her away," Harry whispered, not looking up from where he had his face buried in Draco's shoulder. It was nice. It was warm. Draco smelled good. He didn't see why he should have to see anything right now. "Please. I know you want to hurt her, but I just—I don't care. Call Madam Pomfrey and take her to the hospital wing so that they can heal her foot. I can't try to take it back, or I'll kill her."

Hot shame was washing him now, that he had that desire for pain inside him and had caused Lily's soft sobs. But at least he knew himself well enough to know that he couldn't turn around right now. At least there was that much.

Snape was silent for a moment, then said, "As you wish." Harry heard him mutter the incantation for a message spell, and the silvery flutter of one of them sped away to summon Madam Pomfrey. "Harry," he said then. "Do you feel strong enough to continue to your meeting with Lucius Malfoy, or should we return to the castle?"

Harry felt a surge of gratitude. Snape was trusting him by asking, just as he had trusted Harry to know what was best with Lily, and wasn't giving in to his own inclinations to hurt her.

"I want to go on," he whispered. "Tonight is the end of the truce-dance. I—that's going to make me feel better, because it's such powerful, ancient magic. And I don't want to go to bed or anything, anyway. I want to stay with the two of you."

Draco whispered, "Good. I couldn't let go of you this soon."

Snape sighed. "Let us find Lucius," he said, and guided Harry and Draco around in a careful half-circle, so that they would neither have to separate nor look at Lily. The mere thought of looking at her made Harry shiver in shock, and Draco tighten his hold on him. At his window, Albus Dumbledore leaned his forehead on the glass and shut his eyes in utter despair.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Dark Yule

Harry knew that he could collapse if he let himself. There were too many thoughts in his head. They were drifting in bladed circles that would spring open in swords in a few moments, and pierce him.

If he let them. If he concentrated on what his mother had said, on the things that had just happened to him.

But he didn't want to. Even when he lifted his head from Draco's shoulder, he only looked ahead, and not back, and let Snape guide them along the path of the Forbidden Forest by the light of his wand. Now and then Snape reached out to touch his shoulder, and Harry made himself appreciate the touch without thinking about why Snape felt it necessary to give it.

Draco's arm around his shoulder, and the shoulder pressed against his side, as if Draco wanted them to blend into one being, were even more comforting. Harry used them to leap from moment to moment, to coax and urge his thoughts along past that moment of most danger, until he was sure that he could have walked on his own. He still didn't let Draco go, though, or tug himself free. This time, it was because he didn't want to, rather than because he needed the support.

He knew what he would have to do when this meeting with Lucius had finished. He wondered if he should be alone, but then dismissed that. No, he would want to have Snape and Draco with him for that. Besides, if he left either of them alone this evening, he thought there was a high chance they would go into the hospital wing after Lily.

Harry didn't want her hurt more than she was. It was the end. It should have been the end a year ago, when he had taken her magic. He had been a fool to agree to answering the letter in the first place.

You didn't know who it was from then.

But he could have suspected, and avoided this, if he'd been just a bit smarter.

Well, now he was. He was going to close off that part of his life. That meant that he wouldn't hurt his mother further, and he would not let anyone else hurt her, either. Let her cease to exist to him, as much as though she had died when he was born. He need no longer remember what she had said to him.

The trees ran out ahead of them, and then they came to a halt in a wide clearing that Harry supposed must be the place. Snape halted, at least, and glanced at Draco, who nodded.

Harry stared around inquiringly. The place seemed familiar, though he couldn't make out the similarity until he turned around and saw an arch of branches against the moon. He remembered those branches.

This is the clearing where Connor and I fought the Dark Lord in first year.

Harry gave a violent shiver, and Draco cast a warming charm on him without being asked, drawing a little away to do so. Harry gave him a faint smile. "Thank you," he said, and Draco's gaze sharpened as his voice limped and croaked.

"Harry—"

"Ah, Potter," said Lucius's voice. "And Draco. And Severus. I did not expect you, at least, to join us, Severus."

"Lucius." Harry turned around in time to see Snape incline his head. The expression on his face wasn't quite visible, but his voice was laden with irony. "What can I say? Circumstances change."

"They certainly do," Lucius said. Harry realized he must have been at the other side of the clearing, under the trees there. His robes were starred with snow, and so was his hair, which he'd left free of his cloak. He turned his head, and his eyes gleamed in the wand-light as they fastened on Harry. Harry almost thought he saw a faint tightening around their corners, but it vanished at once, and anything could have caused it. "Mr. Potter. I brought some other people with me. I thought they would want to witness the end of our truce-dance, and they wish to present you with gifts."

Harry stiffened and lifted his head. "No former Death Eaters except the ones who are already allied with me, I hope, Lucius?"

Lucius laughed, a sound as sharp and cold as the wind on Harry's cheeks. "Not at all, Mr. Potter. Hawthorn is here, and Adalrico, and Elfrida, though she begs your pardon for not standing. Walking at this stage of the pregnancy is difficult for her." He held out a hand, and another figure stepped forward from the shadows to take his fingers. "And, of course, Narcissa is here, as you might have suspected she would be."

Harry resolved not to show dismay. He had thought this gift-giving ceremony would be private. He bowed to Narcissa. "Mrs. Malfoy," he said. "I'm sorry, but I did not bring a gift for you, or for the other guests." He had sent one to her already, a book of poetry by a witch who had written some of the books on her library shelves.

Narcissa smiled at him, though it vanished when Harry moved a step forward and she could see his face. Harry told himself sternly not to flinch. If they could see some kind of change on his features, they were still unlikely to remark on it. "Harry," she said. "I received your beautiful book of poetry. Thank you. And I think you have misunderstood the nature of our coming here. It is not often a truce-dance is completed, and much less one such as this one, between a Declared Dark wizard and one who is not Dark. We wished to congratulate you, and to give you gifts. We ask for no return, however. In fact, we demand none."

Harry felt his chest tighten. He could think of only a few times and places in wizarding history when it would be appropriate not to give gifts to a powerful wizard. One of them was the formation of a cadre of guards or companions who would make sure that the powerful wizard was not exposed to danger while he attended to the business of Light or Dark.

"I am not a Lord," he said quietly.

Narcissa smiled at him. "We know that," she said. "And we don't want you to be, Harry, or to Declare for Light or Dark. No matter which you

chose, your choice would disappoint some of your allies. You are already reaching out across both chasms. I received a letter from Tybalt Starrise the other day, saluting me and asking formal permission to consider himself a friend of my family. He thought he should, since he is aware that you and I are in close alliance.”

“How?” Harry asked in bewilderment. Tybalt hadn’t even sent him a formal salutation as yet, much less seemed aware of the way that Harry was joined to the Malfoys. Now, Harry had to wonder how much his manipulation in the Forbidden Forest had really fooled the son of Starrise after all.

Narcissa shook her head slightly, her smile brilliant. “Many people saw us that day we visited the Ministry after your kidnapping, Harry. It is becoming known. And now you will have people reaching out to you, asking permission for formal alliances. And your allies must get to know each other, of course. What good will it be for you if they do not?”

Harry bowed his head, a bit overwhelmed. Trying to match this happening with the ideas that his mother had given him, that people would only gather around him because they had vile magic or wanted something from him—

He stopped his thoughts and slid them under the pool of quicksilver. Draco had already noticed the swift burst of emotion, and slid close to him, one hand reaching out to clasp Harry’s. Harry nodded to him in gratitude, then faced Narcissa again.

“There’s still no need for you to dedicate yourselves to me the way that the Death Eaters dedicated themselves to—“ He choked, unable to say the name Voldemort just yet, after thinking how much like him he was.

“We aren’t doing that,” said Narcissa. “We can’t be doing that, because you aren’t a Lord.” She winked at Harry, as if the logic made everything better. “We’re simply forming the core of a counterforce, one that will fight the Death Eaters who go back to him, and Dumbledore’s Order of the Phoenix. Rosier’s attack the other day, and similar attacks on Hawthorn and Adalrico—both of which failed—

taught us that truth. You need us organized, Harry, not scattered and acting alone and apart any more. So we shall become part of an organization this night. We will give you gifts that symbolize that commitment. If you give them back to us, or do something for us in return, then you'll be rejecting our allegiance. So please don't do that." She ended with a little curtsy that Harry decided was all right. He had bowed to her, after all.

"All right," he said, swallowing hard.

Narcissa nodded to him, and then turned and gestured to the trees. Harry saw an odd shadow floating out to meet them. He understood what it was—a levitating chair—only when he made out Elfrida's shape reclining in it.

She smiled at him. Harry had seen some pregnant women who looked absolutely miserable, but, seven months gone, Millicent's mother only looked radiantly happy. She didn't even appear heavy, more as if her body had changed into some beautiful creature capable of protecting both herself and Marian. Blankets thick with warming charms were tucked around her, and Adalrico stood behind the litter, beaming proudly.

"Hello, Harry," Elfrida said, holding out a hand. Harry went forward and clasped it, Draco moving closely at his side all the way. "I am glad that you are the one we're dedicating ourselves to. My commitment will be less extensive than that of the others, of course, because I have the oath to my children that must come first, but whatever I can do for you, I will."

"Thank you," said Harry, feeling ridiculously as if he were about to start crying at any second.

Adalrico nodded when he caught Harry's eye. "You need never worry about my loyalty," he said, and then laughed. "The Dark Lord made sure of that, when he sent Rabastan Lestrangle to kill me."

Harry scanned him anxiously, but it appeared that he was fine, and had taken no damage from the attack. "What about Hawthorn?" he asked.

“Here, Harry,” said her voice, and she came forward.

Harry studied the pallor of her face with a frown until he remembered that the full moon was only a few days past, and relaxed. Hawthorn sniffed at him, and frowned back. Harry ignored that. He was sure that his scent glammers would hold up, though a werewolf’s nose was strongest in the week on either side of the transformation.

“Who came after you?” he asked.

“Bellatrix.” Hawthorn’s voice gave the words a low, snarling twist that Harry thought was born more of satisfaction than anger. “She went away yelping for her pains, trailing blood from the arm that you had already shortened for her.”

Harry refused to let himself think about taking body parts. He nodded. “And you’re resolved, too, to bind yourself to me?”

Hawthorn caught his eye. Her gaze said clearly that she wasn’t about to let him forget what they’d shared that one Friday she had come to the school. “Yes,” she said, and that was enough.

Harry nodded again, and took a deep breath, and turned to Lucius. “Then we can finish the truce-dance, Mr. Malfoy,” he said. Lucius could feel a soul-deep thrill racing through his body. The ancient magic had been growing steadily since Potter came into the clearing, and now, with his statement, it was time for the end of the dance.

Lucius was feeling emotions roil up in him now, all the excitement and frustration and anger and wonder of the two years he and Potter had danced this ritual. Even for someone who had Declared for the Dark before he was out of Hogwarts, who had fought beside the Dark Lord in his war, who had danced the pureblood dances almost before he could speak, this was not something that happened often. The truce-dance took a long time, and was fragile in the first stages. Most purebloods trusted to some other kind of ritual to bind them to their

enemies, or former enemies. Marriage or joining had done the trick in the older days.

It was the last step of the dance that caused the most consternation in those who used it.

Lucius had anticipated this, though, since the Midsummer day in his house when he and Potter had completed the third step of the dance and he had begun to think that he would see it through to the end. There was only one set of gifts that was fit to end such a sacred and mighty waltz. Potter knew it, too, and his gaze lingered on Lucius's as both of them backed away to opposite sides of the clearing.

He was not about to refuse or back out.

Lucius's heart gave one vivid jump, and then the wave of emotions crested and broke. It was as himself that he went forward to meet Potter, feeling young as he had not felt since Draco was born. It made things even better that Severus was here to see this. Severus had shown too much disdain for the pureblood dances at times, as was natural coming from one raised without them.

He strode towards Potter, and the night around him came alive with glittering blue swords of light. The truce-dance tightened around them, and compelled them to finish things. The swords cut above Lucius's head, and then flashed along beside him as he walked, defining a narrow corridor of which he could not venture. He looked at them once from the corner of his eye, and nodded. They were frost-blue, the blue of shadows on snow. Everything was as it should be.

Potter was walking forward, too, his head up and his steps preternaturally calm. He was no boy, Lucius thought, for all that his age would have said so, and five years ago he would not have been able to envision binding himself to someone this young.

But that was the mistake that Dumbledore had made. Lucius was certain of it. To the old fool, children were pawns and always had been, and he disdained their ability to be more than mindless soldiers. He had underestimated Potter, and badly, and now he would pay part of the price for it.

They met in the middle of the clearing, and the swords escorting Potter and the ones escorting him met and melted together, into a blade of pure power that hovered over their heads. It would fall on their necks should one of them do something to hurt the other now. That was not going to happen, Lucius thought in amusement as he dropped to one knee. He had never understood the ancient purebloods who had thought that precaution necessary.

Why would someone come this far and then back out? The magic around him was song, was sweet smell, was pleasurable beyond belief. No hatred or desire to betray could survive that.

Potter dropped to one knee in front of him. With all the growing he'd done lately, he wasn't much shorter than Lucius in this posture. He met Lucius's eyes, and Lucius saw no trace of wavering in him. He might have been the one who started this dance, but Potter was the one who would finish it.

"No gift is fit to carry the conclusion of a ritual so powerful," Potter whispered, "but magic itself."

Lucius nodded. Potter would have known that, of course. But usually, the wizard who gave the gift had the choice of what it would be. Lucius had demanded the right to specify his gift, though, and Potter was going to let him.

"I wish you to give me the power to speak Parseltongue," Lucius whispered.

Potter nodded. "I thought you would say that," he murmured, and then reached one hand towards his chest as the blue glow of the sword above them brightened and turned deep green, the color of forest leaves in the darkness. Lucius hid his amusement and curiosity. Potter's soul was that deep green color, then, primarily. He would have to go back to his books to identify the many meanings that shade could carry.

Potter touched his chest, and long trails of deep green power flowed out of his skin and coiled in his palm. He moved his fingers and blew

on them, and the magic drifted towards Lucius, wrapped around him, and sunk in.

Lucius closed his eyes. The magic joined his heartbeat, a second echoed beat, and then settled fully into him. Potter still possessed the power to speak to snakes, of course, but he had shared his gift. Lucius was now the third living Parselmouth in Britain.

Lucius opened his eyes. Potter, understanding what he wanted, had already moved so that the serpent badge on his robes was right in front of Lucius's eyes.

"A pity that snake will not animate," Lucius said, and saw Potter's eyes widen slightly before he smiled back.

"That would be a useful weapon," he said, and Lucius could hear the others gasping, faintly. Even more faintly, he could make out the sound of the hisses that Potter was actually giving. "Alas, I hardly think the Headmaster would approve of more snakes slithering around Hogwarts."

Lucius nodded once, satisfied. He had barely admitted to anyone, ever, his admiration of Parselmouths, his wish to be one. Such dreams were for children, and he had not been a child since he was five. It had been the reason he had come to hear the Dark Lord speak in the first place, though not the only reason he had decided to follow him. The languid hissing sliding out of the Dark Lord's mouth as he conversed with his snakes was a marvel, and to hear snakes respond...

Lucius could not wait until the first time that happened.

He noticed that Potter's gaze was fixed on him, calmly, patiently, waiting, and he reached towards his own chest. Gray-blue power slipped out and snared his fingers as a solid thing, with a faint cold touch, like mist. He held out his hand to Potter, and Potter clasped it without speaking, as was proper, accepting the gift Lucius offered.

As it happened, Lucius had judged this gift carefully, and he did not think it less valuable than the Parseltongue that Potter had given him,

especially since Narcissa had told him what she believed Harry would do and think and feel in the end.

Potter blinked, and shuddered, and looked puzzled for a moment. Then his eyes snapped up to Lucius's face.

"The blue-gray color," he breathed. "That was the color of your Manor and your old family crest."

Lucius inclined his head. "You are now linked to the Manor's wards, accepted as one of the family," he said. "You will be able to pass in and out of the house at will, though anyone who comes with you and is not a Malfoy in blood will still need to be verified with the wards. You are welcome to us, always. You may command our house elves." He saw Potter's eyes spark at that, but he listened in patient silence. Lucius approved. This dance was old, and not the place for whatever new notions Potter might have. "You will be recognized by old family treasures which would not normally respond to any wizard but one born a Malfoy. In good measure, you are ours now, Harry."

Potter did not react to the sudden change of name, unless the deeper inclination of his head sprang from that, and Lucius did not really think it did. "Thank you, Lucius. This is a princely gift."

Lucius smiled at him. "I feel yours is as well."

The magic swelled around them at that, the sword descending until Lucius felt the cold metal on the back of his neck. Then it turned warm, and ran away like water, and the dance ended, and they were bound.

Lucius smirked at the others as he stood and walked away from Harry. Narcissa's gaze was soft, as well it might be. Lucius had explained to her what he meant to do, and she had entirely approved.

He will be tied closely to all of us, but he is now bound most closely to the Malfoys. We have the largest claim on him. When the war is done and the normal round of life resumes, we shall have an advantage with him that no one else does.

Harry backed slowly away from Lucius, dazed. He really had not expected that, and he was still trying to determine just how he felt about it.

Draco caught his eye and smiled at him, and Harry was reminded that he had wanted to give Draco his Christmas gift when he would feel best that evening. He did now, the ancient pleasure of the magic, the ritual repeated so many times that the magic had a life of its own, still sliding across his skin. He lifted his hands and cast out a skein of light between them.

He had once calmed his destructive magic by creating things. He had not determined to do this so that he would have the solace of creation, but it made the gift he was about to give even better, after what had happened to him.

"Merry Christmas, Draco," he whispered, when he was sure that he had Draco's attention, and then remembered.

He turned and spun the light, pouring the memories into it much as he had poured the happy memories of his life with Connor into the memory album. This time, though, they took the form of images, scenes he had lived through with Draco.

He chose their first flying lesson, even though at the time he had been furious at Draco for making him show off in front of other people. Now, though, it was rather funny to see Draco lob Neville's Remembrall into the air and himself chase after it, especially because he could remember the exact infuriating smirk on Draco's face when he caught the little ball and turned around.

He let that scene waver and melt into one of the many study sessions he'd shared with Draco that first year. They'd shared the same Defense Against the Dark Arts book, since Draco had lost his that evening. Harry still hadn't been very trusting, then, but he had let Draco settle in the chair next to him and bend his head over the book beside his. Harry let the colors of the scene slide into a soft light that he knew hadn't come from the fireplace that evening, just to show

Draco how supremely, deeply content he had been then, though he hadn't realized it at the time.

Then came the first party after he'd won a Quidditch game against the Ravenclaw team, and Draco laughing at him when he cast a hex on Blaise, and him teaching Draco spells, and their meeting in Diagon Alley the summer before second year, and a conversation in the hospital wing when Harry had still been trying to keep Draco from realizing that the dairy affecting his mind had come from Lucius, and flashes of the Chamber of Secrets tunnel where Draco had walked just behind him into the heart of danger—nothing closer to the Chamber than that; the direct memory still hurt too much for Harry to touch it—and some of the time he'd spent with Draco over the summer afterwards, and how he'd reached out for Draco when he missed his friend after two weeks apart, and how Draco had spoken to him before he went home for Christmas last year, and the way he'd come dashing out of the Manor when Harry had shown up there, and the talk they'd had in the hospital wing at the end of last year, and the apology Draco had given him after he'd summoned Julia and been doused with empathy, and an image of them curled up in bed together.

He ended with a memory he hadn't actually seen from outside, but thought he could imagine well enough: that of Draco hugging him tonight, just before they journeyed to the clearing. He smiled at Draco over the top of the skein of light, and then parted his hands and let it flow away.

He didn't think he could put the memories into a Pensieve and keep them around. They would be too intense for everyday sight. But as a special gift, as a way of showing Draco how much he meant to him, he could do this, yes.

Draco was staring at him with an expression that Harry knew he had never seen on his face before. He looked slightly flushed, and tears stood glittering in his eyes. But he reached out a hand, and Harry went to him without hesitation.

Draco didn't try to pull him into an embrace, just looked at him. Harry forced himself to meet that gaze head-on. If Draco had heard what his mother had said to him, there would be questions later, he knew.

But Draco just nodded for now, and whispered, "I have something to tell you. It's important. Give me—give me a little while, and I can tell you."

Harry couldn't keep his brows from arching in curiosity, but his allies were waiting at their backs, so he nodded back and said, "All right. I can wait."

He turned and met their eyes. Hawthorn and Adalrico had knelt, while Elfrida had settled further back into her chair. Narcissa, of all of them, stood in the forefront, her gaze direct and her smile warm.

"To you, Harry Potter, I pledge my loyalty and my faith," she said. "And as a token of that loyalty and my faith, I give you this." She came forward and gently laid something down at his feet.

Harry picked it up. It was a small hand mirror, made of black wood, with a silvery face. He looked up at her in question.

"This is one of the Black treasures," said Narcissa, "the one I remember the best from when I was a girl. I couldn't resist picking it up when we went—where we went." Harry almost smiled when he realized how reluctant she was to mention the name of the Black house in front of his allies, but he didn't, because it would have been a smile of amusement, and this was not that kind of moment. "Look into the mirror, and it will show you images of the place that my ancestors claimed they came from. A country of fire and air. It's lovely."

Harry blinked. "Why?"

"For when you can find nothing beautiful around you," said Narcissa, and gave him a deep, sad smile. Her voice dropped. "I felt an explosion of Dark magic before you came to us, and the trees hindered our purpose in walking to the clearing. You had an encounter with someone who meant you harm, and I recognize the

look in your eyes from the summer you spent with us. It was one of your parents.”

Harry hastily dropped his eyes. Narcissa’s hand brushed his hair, and then she turned and walked away so that Hawthorn could come forward.

“To you, Harry Potter, I pledge my loyalty and my faith.” Hawthorn’s voice was deeper than Narcissa’s, laden with a different music, and she placed a pot with a vine growing out of it at his feet. “Our home is called the Garden, and many Parkinsons for the last hundred years have taken the names of flowers. What I’ve brought you is a small plant enchanted to bear hawthorn blossoms. Speak into them, and I will hear you, wherever I am.”

Harry blinked. “I thought hawthorn plants were, well, bigger.”

Hawthorn laughed at him, lolling her tongue slowly from her mouth. “That is why I enchanted one to bear you flowers, Harry, and not simply brought you a bush,” she said, and then backed off.

Adalrico came forward, and dipped his head. “To you, Harry Potter, we pledge our loyalty and our faith,” he said. “I speak for my wife as well as myself.” Harry nodded. He’d expected that, given Elfrida’s condition and her training. “We, perhaps, do not do as well as the others. One gives you a gift of peace, another a gift that will bring her aid. We give you a gift of war.”

He handed a small object to Harry that Harry quickly realized was a sheathed knife. He hissed to himself, but he did not think it was the same thing as the knife Lucius had sent him for one of his truce-gifts. He drew the blade, and gasped slightly. It appeared to be made of gold, though the glittering edge said it wasn’t; gold would have been too soft. He touched it with one finger and glanced up questioningly at Adalrico.

“One of my ancestors fell in love with a Lady of the Light,” said Adalrico softly. “But she would not have him, which is not surprising, since he was Declared Dark and had aided the Dark Lord that Lady defeated. He created this knife to symbolize what he could not have.

The hilt is forged of the same rock that makes up Blackstone's walls. The knife blade is sunlight that he captured on a Midsummer evening—the last ray as the sun sank beneath the horizon on the day of longest light."

"I can't take this," Harry whispered. "It's too precious."

"You must," said Adalrico, and folded his hands firmly around the knife. "My ancestor succeeded better than he knew. The hilt is Dark, and amenable enough to our hands. But the blade is Light, and she has never been happy with us. She twists rather than strike true. She shines more for you already than I have seen her do for anyone else. Let her stay where she will be happy."

Harry nodded, and swallowed, and slipped the knife into his robe pocket. Adalrico bowed to him and stepped away.

"Is there anything else?" Harry asked, unable to believe it could end so abruptly, but unable to think of any other rituals that were required, either. He hadn't even known he would meet the rest of his allies here, and so he'd planned nothing for greeting anyone other than Lucius.

"I had one question."

Harry nodded and turned to face Lucius, who had his head cocked to one side, his hair slipping over his eyes. "Ask it."

"We felt an explosion of Dark magic before you came to us," Lucius said softly. "We felt it yearning towards the stars, and then it folded away again. We knew it must have been you. What caused that?"

Harry found himself fighting the temptation to sink to the ground again. He drew in a deep breath, and said, "My mother came to speak to me."

Lucius's eyes widened slightly. Harry wondered why. Had he not thought that Lily Potter was still alive?

No. Wait. He knows something about the prophecy now, or at least the information surrounding the prophecy. That means—

"Your mother made you that angry," said Lucius. "Most parents do not do that when they are merely contradicting their children, and you are not a child who takes so ill to a parent's high-handed decree. She could not have been in danger, or you would have brought her with you. You did not meet happily." He nodded, as though to say he were satisfied with his own reasoning. "What did she do to you?"

Harry could feel Draco trembling beside him, yearning to tell. Snape said nothing. He would say nothing, Harry knew, as much because he felt out of place here as because he would not betray Harry's secrets. But Draco was a danger, especially because he had heard so much. And this was his father. He would see almost nothing wrong with telling him.

"Lucius," said Harry. "Leave it."

"We cannot," said Adalrico, with a dawning note of horror in his voice. "Your mother. What can she have done?"

"You came broken to our home after your mother finished with you last Christmas," said Narcissa, and then her eyes widened as if she were listening to herself. "A year and a day," she said. "Did she come to demand vengeance? And what can she have done? I know you, Harry, and you are not one to let your magic fly simply because your mother made an unreasonable demand of you. What did she say? What do?"

Harry shook his head. "No," he breathed. "I will not speak of this with you."

Lucius made a noise. Harry looked at him, and blinked. He had not realized that Lucius had enough soul left in him to look sickened. "Harry, was there—"

"Do not push me, Lucius."

Harry allowed a bit of his power to flare out from his shields along with his words, and that silenced Lucius immediately. Everyone in the clearing was staring at him now, except Draco, who was clinging to

his side like a monkey again, and Snape, who murmured soothing words while looking away so that Harry could have at least one gaze off him. Harry nodded.

"It is over and done," said Harry, when he thought he could speak without hitting someone, either with his fist or with a slap of power. "I see no reason to speak of it again. I see no reason for anyone to confront her. It is done. Pushing matters further in the past only resulted in blood feuds, in endless conflicts between families." He was privately impressed with himself for managing such cool words when his insides were vibrating like plucked harpstrings. "You are my allies, and I do not think this an unreasonable request." He turned his eyes to Adalrico, Elfrida, and Hawthorn. "You swore formal alliance with me, and so you are my family's friends as well as mine. You cannot take up arms or magic against them."

He glanced over his shoulder at the Malfoys. "You are not my family's allies, but we are bonded closely," he said, "more closely than ever now since the completion of the truce-dance. This is the end. It is enough. I want no one to touch my mother again. I want to forget about her."

"Your wounds still bleed," said Lucius, the strange expression lingering on his face. "That is enough reason to destroy her."

Harry forced his eyes to remain blank and calm as he watched Lucius. "I will attack you if you harm her," he said softly. "I'll suffer the backlash of magic from the broken truce, of course, but I am strong enough to survive. I am the one she hurt. I should be the one to decide what vengeance is given, and I say there will be no more."

"This would be the meting out of justice," Lucius spat, a more familiar anger working its way back into his eyes.

Harry shrugged. "I do not care," he said flatly. "This. Is. Ended."

Lucius only shook his head slowly, as though he could not comprehend how Harry thought, but he turned away without another word. Narcissa lingered, looking hard at Harry. Harry refused to meet her eyes, and in the end, she followed her husband.

Hawthorn opened her mouth, but in the end, she had to leave, and so did Adalrico. Both of them had made the terms of their alliance willingly; neither could harm James, Lily, or Connor. Elfrida did stare hard at Harry, pressing his hand.

“If you had been my own,” she said, “I would have raised you with love, and with more pride in the strength of your magic than fear of you.”

Harry couldn’t suppress a wince, but he told himself it was only a lucky guess that let Elfrida pierce so close to the heart of the matter, and not truth. “Thank you,” he said, and kissed her cheek.

Her chair floated away, with Adalrico close beside her. Harry took several deep breaths, his head clearing, and then turned and met Snape’s and Draco’s gazes.

“And now?” Snape asked, his voice emotionless.

“Now,” said Harry, picking up the mirror and the hawthorn plant, shrinking them, and slipping them into his pockets, “we go to Dumbledore.”

Albus knew they were coming long before they reached his office. That was not solely because of the wards on Hogwarts, either, or because of the spells he had cast on his moving staircase to let him know when someone was nearing his door.

He knew they would come when Lily failed. They would know where this had begun, and they would seek out the one they blamed for this, and doubtless try to hurt him.

Albus was even inclined to let them—up to a point.

The door opened, and the young Malfoy heir led the way. He walked in front of Harry, as though he were a guard. At Harry’s back came Severus, his face gone so blank that Albus was reminded of the way

he had looked while awaiting his trial on charges of being a Death Eater and war criminal.

Harry stepped around Draco Malfoy and looked at Albus.

Albus looked back, his heart aching. He had made a very bad mistake. He had underestimated Harry, thinking of him as only a mass of needs and emotions that he understood very well. After all, was not Harry the product of Lily's training? And had he not himself trained Lily, taught her to distinguish between selfishness and the world's need, inured her to sacrifice?

But Harry had changed enough in the period between the time he arrived at Hogwarts and now that he had become more than those needs. Albus had been aware of that, dimly, but he had thought that he need only emotionally exhaust Harry, and then isolate him with Lily, in order to turn him back into what he had been, the trained savior that the world so badly needed. People with less damaged minds than Harry had been turned that way. Albus knew the Death Eaters had used the technique.

Lily had misstepped. Harry's eyes were uncompromising, and Albus prepared himself for a list of demands.

"I consider that I have no truce with you," said Harry, speaking in a voice of flat, utter calm. Albus had heard wizards use that voice right before they committed suicide, or induced others to commit it. "You have broken it badly enough that I have no more obligations to you. I ask only noninterference. If you do not hurt me further, then I shall be content to ignore you."

"And the war?" Albus had to ask, since that was the reason he had sacrificed Harry and Lily and Peter and many other people in the first place.

"Neutral allies, perhaps." Harry looked almost indifferent. He would not let Albus touch him again; that was plain in his stance and his voice, even while Draco and Severus looked at him incredulously. "I have no objection to your helping Connor and me fight against Voldemort. That does not mean that I will consider a close working

arrangement. And while I accept that I can do nothing about Connor's being in the Tournament by now, I will hurt you again if you hurt him."

Albus sat in silence. This was both more and less than he had expected. He was grateful that he would not have to pay too heavy a price for his mistakes, but he could not see what Harry was gaining from this.

I must be sure, he thought, meeting those blank, hard green eyes. He's a grown man now, I see that, but I don't know what kind of man he is, and I must, for the world to be safe.

"And Lily?" he asked.

"Keep her away from me," said Harry, "unless I ever specifically indicate that I want to see her again. Save her foot, if you can. Do not mention her name to me. I have no more interest in seeing this splashed across the front page of the Daily Prophet than you do. But so far as I am concerned, I am an orphan now. I am going to write back to my father tomorrow and explain the situation to him."

"You can't mean that, Harry!"

That was Draco, bursting out with all the passion of one still a child. Albus had seen how he fought Lily, though. He wondered if he should have to consider this boy also a young man, and what it would mean if he did.

"You think I should give James another chance?" Harry looked at Draco in gentle inquiry.

"Not that!" Draco waved one hand. "You have to demand more than that from this fool! Answers, money, that he let you whip him until he bleeds...something!"

Harry turned and met Albus's eyes. Albus flinched.

"But I know why he did it," said Harry softly, into the sudden terrible silence. "He wanted to keep everything as it had been. And now he's seen that won't work. He nearly had a second Dark Lord on his hands

this evening. I know that he won't try something like that again. We understand each other now." A faint mocking tone touched his voice on the last words.

"And I know why it's better to leave him alive and not attack him," Harry said. "He's a Light Lord, though he so rarely uses his magic that most people forget that. He's stronger than I am. If I tried to destroy him, he would resist, and that might destroy Hogwarts, Scotland—let us be realistic, half of Britain. I will hurt him only if I must, only if he interferes with me again."

Albus inclined his head. A terrible upset was growing in him, but he could give it no name as yet.

"And he's Headmaster of Hogwarts," Harry went on. "He's tied into the wards of the school. In the last extremity, the school will obey him. I don't fancy giving him hostages to work his will with."

"You can bring him to court." That was Severus, his voice soft, so soft, and bitter. Of course, Albus thought, as he gazed at his old pupil. He has been before the Wizengamot twice now, and not truly believed he deserved it either time. 'Tell everyone what he has done. They would prevent him from remaining Headmaster, and the Aurors do have ways of binding even Lords who have done wrong.'

Albus narrowed his eyes and lifted his head. "Did you think I would let you do that, Severus?" he asked.

Severus's eyes stared through him, dark and still.

"I told you before," said Harry. "I won't have that. I won't have my so-called parents food for every carrion crow come to feast. I won't embarrass Connor that way. I won't have everyone knowing what—what happened to me." He shook his head. "They are not to see."

Albus felt a sudden surge of gratitude towards Lily. That she trained him to shun public notice might yet be the salvation of us all.

"But they should be punished, Harry," Draco insisted.

“I’m not interested in casting blame.” Harry gave him a flat look. “I told you, I want this ended, cut off so it can’t grow any further. That means turning my back on notions of owing them anything else, but it also means giving up the notion of vengeance.”

“I hate it,” whispered Draco.

“I know.” Harry put a hand on his shoulder and kept it there, acting as if he had forgotten Albus were watching. “But it’s done.”

Albus gave a name, finally, to the feeling rising in his chest. He would have preferred it if Harry had stormed into the office, denouncing him and Lily and preparing to extract a pound of flesh in payment. This quiet, cold way of burying everything in silence was the way a pure Slytherin would take vengeance.

If he is everything that Lily made him, then she sculpted him into a Slytherin, and my advice helped that. We ruined our own plans.

That was too upsetting to think about for right now, so Albus nodded and gave his consent to Harry’s terms. There was really nothing else he could do, and this time, he had no notion of violating them. All his plans so far had foundered on the rocks of Harry’s personality. He would have to rebuild them from the ground up.

For some reason, though, what haunted him when the three Slytherins had left his office was not Harry’s cold gaze or his words, but Severus’s eyes, dark and implacable as the deeps of space.

And as unforgiving.

He and Draco were back in their room—luckily, with Blaise and Vince both in the common room bragging about dancing with their dates—before Harry thought to ask, “I thought you had a Christmas present for me, Draco?”

Draco flushed, surprisingly. "Yeah," he said. "My mum slipped it to me while you were dancing with my father." He looked down. "But it feels silly next to the one you gave me."

"Draco."

The word was enough. Draco took a deep breath and slid a flat box out of his robes, which must have been enchanted to insure that it didn't bulge and distort the cloth oddly.

"Merry Christmas, Harry," he whispered.

Harry opened the box eagerly. The other gifts he had received this night had been grand and solemn, and he valued what they represented more than he could value them for themselves. But Draco was outside that. Draco was not just an ally to him, and that made his gifts more than just truce-promises.

Harry found a wizard's chess set inside. He picked up one of the pieces, and stared. It was a Hungarian Horntail, carved as if it were crouched over a nest of eggs. As he watched, it flexed its wings and turned to glance up at him.

Rooting through the rest of the box, he found that all the pieces were dragons. The queens were Horntails in flight, the kings Welsh Greens with their wings half-spread, the pawns tiny dragonets, the rooks the Horntails on their nests, the bishops snarling Chinese Fireballs that warmed his fingers when he touched them, and the knights rearing Antipodean Opaleyes. All of them moved on their own, even if it was only to swivel their eyes and roar, and all were colored in the appropriate hues for their scales.

Harry shook his head and swallowed, then looked up. "It's wonderful," he said. "How?"

Draco blushed. "I owed the instructions to my mother," he said. "She got it made. But I paid for it out of my own vault. I wanted you to have it, Harry. The dragons didn't leave you enough of themselves. At least you can remember them now."

Harry carefully set the set on the bed and grabbed Draco, tugging him to him hard enough to make the dragons bounce and snarl in their box. He held his friend tight, until Draco made a muffled complaint about breathing. Then he muttered into his ear, "You idiot. It's perfect."

Draco shivered, which was odd, and made Harry wonder if he still had a bit of melting snow down his neck or something. But he pulled back with a pleased smile and said, "I'm glad you like it. Do you want to play?"

Harry was more than happy to start playing. It distracted Draco from asking questions that he didn't want asked, for one thing.

But it also made Draco's face flush further when he found out that the Chinese Fireballs were resistant to being moved, and he argued with several of them, while they responded by trying to bite his fingers off. For some reason, Harry found, he really liked watching Draco when his eyes were bright and he was animated like that.

Interlude: Self-Recording Pensieves

Jane Blane

Committee On Experimental Potions

December 31st, 1994

Dear Madam Blane:

I wish to register the creation of a new potion with your Committee. I have completed the necessary forms (see attached packet), and this letter is only to give a short description of the potion for your records.

I invented this potion to mimic the properties of a Pensieve. It has the silvery color and texture of thoughts placed into a Pensieve, and holds memories, as they do. However, this potion takes the strongest memories of a certain specific mind in the room with it, the first new one to enter once its creator has placed it into a bottle made of glass (see attached packet, especially forms C.1 and D.4, for details on the necessity of a glass container), and contains them. The creator of the potion must usually speak to this new person in order to facilitate certain memories floating to the forefront of the mind. Also, while the Pensieve Potion can contain a great many memories, and store them very fast, it is sometimes a tedious task to sort through them. Each container of the potion can be used only once, and only on the first person other than the creator to enter the room where it is present; should a second person enter the room, it will not record his memories. All these are limitations of the potion that I intend to work out as my research continues.

Suggested uses: instructing students, testing the veracity of suspected criminals, providing testimony at trial.

I await your word on whether you will allow the production of this potion, and hope to find favor in your eyes.

I am,

Professor Severus Snape

Potions Master

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Chapter Forty: Election Day

The Muggles had never been able to see the last tower in the Tower of London, where the Ministry had kept its voting owls for four hundred years. Rather than following the usual practice of cloaking it in illusions of a ruined bit of stonework, the original family that had hit upon the idea of the voting owls, the Light-devoted Gloryflowers, had Disillusioned the whole thing.

Rufus steadied himself on the uppermost level of a tower that he'd had to climb by feel, and shivered in the push of an impatient gust of wind, and decided that it was still—mostly—an excellent idea.

He turned and extended his hand, helping Amelia out of the last archway, though his murmured warning to duck her head came too late. She cursed under her breath, and then climbed up and stood beside him. Rufus heard her swallow as they looked out over the expanse of Muggle London, draped in snow and in silence. It was the first day of January, the first day of the new year.

And the day of our election.

Rufus found he was grinning. It was highly unusual for him to smile that much, but he couldn't really help it. Things were changing. He might love the law, but he had no objection to change, especially when he thought it would improve the law.

"I never thought I would be standing here," Amelia murmured.

Rufus turned to her and raised his eyebrows in an expression of polite disbelief. Oh, certainly, Amelia had been shocked that Fudge had gone as far as he had, but she had moved too quickly and smoothly, both before and after the vote of no confidence, to establish her own candidacy. Rufus didn't think that he would really believe her if she admitted to no ambition.

Amelia tossed her head impatiently. "All right, I didn't know that I would be standing here now," she said.

Rufus could share that sentiment. “Neither did I,” he murmured, as he began walking carefully along the narrow path of invisible stone set before them, one hand resting on the outer wall to guide him. The wall was only up to his waist, not really as high as he could have wished. It was impossible for anyone but the candidates in a Ministerial election to alter the Tower, though—another Gloryflower addition—and Rufus certainly didn’t have the inclination or the talent to work stone. “I did think Cornelius would be Minister for another good ten years. Or perhaps not good, not under Cornelius, but at least not intolerably bad.”

“But he was,” said Amelia, hurrying after him.

Rufus cast an incredulous glance back at her, before understanding the gleam in her eyes. She wasn’t asking for reassurance. She was challenging him to say that she could possibly have acted wrongly. Rufus relaxed.

“He was,” he agreed. “And just think, we might not have known until too late if it wasn’t for Harry Potter.” He saw the gleam of metal ahead, and stepped back, bowing. Amelia had arranged this election. It was only right that she go first.

“The child disturbs me,” Amelia muttered, as she took the honor with a nod to him. “Lords don’t appear from nowhere like that. Dumbledore’s coming was like a storm slowly rolling over Britain, and there were rumors of You-Know-Who for a long time before he showed his face.”

“I do not think he has evil intentions.” Rufus had already had this argument several times. e He found it amusing that everyone around him kept thinking he would change his mind about the boy.

“I just find it unnatural,” Amelia murmured, and this time Rufus deliberately didn’t warn her to duck her head as she passed under the arched door into the last invisible room. “Ouch!”

Rufus held his laughter, and followed her, almost crouching. They could still see outside, but there were walls around them; the wind was cut to almost nothing. And around them sat the only part of the

Tower not under the Disillusionment Charm: thousands of small, perfectly wrought golden owls, with emerald eyes.

Rufus froze with admiration. It was one thing to hear about them, or see one of them flying with a ballot in its belly, another to see them gathered all together. These were Gloryflower creations, too. The Dark families had a tradition of making artificial animals of the kind that crawled on corpses or hid in abandoned houses—spiders, snakes, rats, centipedes—but the Light ones made beautiful and useful creatures—horses, unicorns, owls.

He barely breathed as he reached out and touched one of the owls on its cold breast. A moment after he touched it, it lit with sparks of warmth under his fingers, and the owl turned its head. Emerald eyes surveyed Rufus for a moment. Rufus held still and waited, patiently. He had already passed the first test—the owls would respond only to the touch of an actual declared candidate for the Minister's post—but he had to wait for the bird to inspect him. The Gloryflowers had not kept control of the owls in their family, but bound them to the Tower and the candidates for the position. Rufus could feel the ancient magic all around him, surging through owl after owl, awakening them one after one, singing and roaring in the invisible stone.

The wave met the wave coming from the owl Amelia had touched, opposite the one he had, and collided with it. For a moment, it was like a meeting of two breakers, and Rufus thought he felt the Tower tremble. Then the waves melted into one another, and he and Amelia stood in the middle of a joined ring.

The owls surged up into the air as one, their wings spreading and catching the harsh New Year's wind. In a moment, they spun around and hurtled out the windows that they could see, though Rufus would only have been able to find them by feel. They exploded in dozens of different directions the moment they were out, heading off to every wizard seventeen or older in Britain—well, the ones who weren't incapacitated by legal restrictions such as being in prison from voting, anyway. They would coast down to each wizard or witch and spit out the ballots already growing in their bellies. The wizard or witch must write down a choice for Minister and return the ballots to the owls. Every bird would be back in the Tower by nightfall, and Rufus and

Amelia, together, would count the ballots. The owls' magic would keep them honest, just as it would prevent anyone else from interfering with their flight.

"Well," said Amelia, when the last owl was out of sight, traveling like a small golden comet flung through stars, "what now?"

Rufus cast a warming charm, and conjured a chair in the corner of the room. "Now we sit down and compare plans for what we're going to do when we become Minister," he said. "Excuse me. For when I become Minister."

Amelia rolled her eyes and conjured a chair of her own. "You can dream, Rufus. No one ever said that you weren't ambitious."

"No, they didn't," said Rufus, and began, patiently, to outline the new way the Aurors would work, and how Amelia would have to prepare for several unexpected losses in that department if he won—or even if he didn't.

"For whom are you voting, Severus?"

Snape gave McGonagall a distrustful look as he took the ballot from the voting owl's beak. She had been pestering him since the night of the Yule Ball for details of Harry's mental state and magic, and when he had refused to give them to her, she'd retreated into these useless pleasantries, as if she really thought that they would persuade him to relax his guard.

"It's none of your business," he said, and quickly scrambled the name, and returned it to the owl. The little creature swallowed the ballot and lifted, skimming towards the windows of the Great Hall, instinctively avoiding the other birds, both real and artificial, headed the same way. Snape watched, almost hoping that someone would try to grab his owl, but no one did. Too bad. The punishment for interfering with a voting owl was amusing to watch: a crippling lightning-like shock to the fingers, which kept someone from being able to write for the rest of the day.

"I might as well tell you that I voted for Scrimgeour," said McGonagall, and leaned back in her chair, surveying the students eating in the Great Hall with a kind of lazy indolence.

Snape watched her in silence. He had no objection to taking knowledge of her when she offered it on a silver platter like this, and she might as well be saying that she'd abandoned the Headmaster. She knew that Scrimgeour and Dumbledore didn't get along, and she had voted for him anyway.

"Why?" Snape asked quietly. He meant several different things by it, on several different resonances. He wondered if she would pick up on all of them.

Her smile was ever so slightly bitter. "I tried to speak to him about a—problem I had with my upper-year Gryffindors, and I spoke to him about your imprisonment. Neither helped. He put me off with platitudes, and with phrases like 'the implacable logic of war.' He talked about not being able to change anything, or disrupt the normal course of law in wizarding Britain. And then it turned out that he did vote to depose Fudge and free you, after all, when I hadn't thought he would do so. I know that I didn't pay the prices for that, Severus. I'm afraid that Harry did."

Snape froze. He had been trying to observe all he could of the other Slytherins and the way they acted around Harry, since he knew it was different now, but no one had so far hinted that Harry had given any sacrifices to free him. "Do you know what it was?" he asked.

McGonagall shook her head. "He missed my class the Friday before the First Task, and Draco Malfoy fainted in it. There were rumors that Hawthorn Parkinson had escorted Harry back to bed in the Slytherin common room. He had some kind of tipping point, Severus, but I don't know what it was." She closed her eyes, as though running the events over again in her mind, then opened them. They had the gleam of a cat chasing down a mouse. "He did receive a letter that morning."

From his mother, perhaps?

Snape snarled and stood. He would have to find Harry and have this out with him, one way or another. In the days since Christmas, Harry had effectively stonewalled both him and Draco, saying that he didn't want to talk about what had happened with Lily, that it was done and that was quite enough. He would talk about spells, Dark Arts, most of what he'd done during Snape's imprisonment, potions, what he thought of Scrimgeour's chances to become the new Minister—anything but what was most important to heal and not just freeze his wounds.

Snape could not imagine Harry breaking down over a letter unless the letter was from Lily. And if Harry had written back to her as part of any bargain to get Snape free...

My Slytherins have him accepting help more readily than he would otherwise. It is now time to make him listen when we ask him not to do things that are sacrifices for him or injurious to his mental health. Harry leaned back on his pillow and thoughtfully turned James's latest letter over and over in his hands. He had written and explained that he didn't want to see his father again, nor have him be concerned over Harry. He would do nothing to interfere in his relationship with Connor, but he had seen Lily again and she had convinced him that he was done with parents.

James had sent back this letter, as if he didn't like Harry's cutting off of contact. Perhaps it would simply say that James would be the one to decide how and if they cut off contact, Harry thought, with a quiver of a smile.

He supposed it would not do much harm if he read it. He certainly did not have to respond, did not feel bound, as he had with his mother—

Harry strangled the thought, which he'd become good at doing, and slid its corpse under the pools of his mind with the corpses of all the other thoughts about her. He slit the envelope and drew out the letter. It was a simple message, and short.

Dear Harry:

You told me that you had not looked into the Pensieve. Until you do, you will not understand why I cannot allow you to cut off contact. You must have a parent, Harry, and I'm the best choice for the role.

Your loving father,

James.

Harry raised his eyebrows. Well, part of that's true enough. I didn't want to see what he might have chosen to send me—probably more memories of a happy family to bring me back to my senses—but perhaps it really is important.

He stretched out a hand and murmured, "Accio James's Pensieve."

The trunk at the foot of the bed opened, and the Pensieve came skimming in through the curtains. Harry was grateful that no one else was in the room. Blaise had gone off to moon over Ginny, Vince to join a snowball fight in the courtyard that the upper-year Ravenclaws had been talking about excitedly at breakfast.

Draco...

Harry shook his head. Draco had pushed him a bit too far this morning. He'd tried to reassure Harry that his magic wasn't foul or evil or awful-smelling, and ignored Harry's quiet requests to stop talking about it. Harry had finally cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, and then cast an illusion at the door, to make it look as though he'd hurried out of the room. Draco was off looking for him now, while Harry made himself comfortable in his bed with James's letter and the latest book Snape had lent him.

Harry drew the Pensieve towards him, and ignored his own fear. Yes, he had some reason to be nervous about Pensieves, but James was not a wizard of Dumbledore's strength and skill. Harry didn't really think he could enchant a Pensieve into a trap, nor that he would want to try. Besides, his own magic was strong enough to resist most spells his father could cast.

He plunged his head beneath the surface.

He found himself in a room it took him a moment to recognize: his father's study at Lux Aeterna. Harry turned in a circle, studying it. The walls were lined with books, and a desk directly in front of him was scattered with papers. Harry walked towards them, curious. He could see no one else in the room just yet.

He bent over the papers, and his eyes widened. They were copies of old Daily Prophet articles, concerning the Death Eater trials. On the top one was a photograph of Snape, his stare fixed on something unseen as he sat in the chain-bound chair of the Wizengamot courtroom.

"I've looked and looked."

Harry jumped and glanced over his shoulder. James had entered, with Remus close behind him, looking pale and harassed. Harry backed cautiously away from the desk, though of course they couldn't see him. James sat down in the chair in front of the desk, and looked wistfully at the articles.

"I've tried to justify my son's choice of guardian," he whispered, "and I can't. Even when I know he was acting as a spy for Dumbledore, making his own sacrifices for the war, Snape was still a bastard. Listen to this." He picked up the paper on top and cleared his throat. "Asked whether it was true that he had risked his life to stop several Death Eater attacks on Muggle villages in late October of this year, Severus Snape told the Wizengamot to 'believe what you like. You will anyway.'" James shook his head and slammed the paper down. "Can you believe him?"

"I don't think his general truthfulness is why Harry chose him as his guardian, James," said Remus, and rubbed his forehead.

You're wrong, Harry thought, at least in part. He glanced curiously out the study's window. The cheerful colors spoke to him of early autumn. This would be before Remus had left James to go to the Seers' Sanctuary, then.

“I’ve been through all of them,” said James adamantly, “looking for some sign that he displayed any of those qualities he was supposed to have—courage, strength of will, compassion—to other people. Nothing. I think Harry made a mistake, Remus. He must have done. Snape puts on a good act, but he only wants Harry with him to get one over on me. I’ve looked at it up and down, and I can come to no other conclusion.”

“I told you what I saw at the school last year,” said Remus. “There are times Snape would have killed Sirius to keep Harry safe.”

“And now he’s dead.” James’s voice was an ugly, bitter thing. Harry winced. Did he ever mourn like Connor and I did? His father pushed the articles around in an agitated manner. “I don’t know, Remus. I suppose perhaps the papers don’t have the most unbiased sources. I’ll look elsewhere.” He stood up and paced to the door. “I just can’t believe that a man I’ve always despised should have more favor from my son than I do,” he whispered.

Remus caught himself on what looked like the edge of a vehement protest, and shook his head. They left, shutting the door behind them, and the Pensieve shuddered lightly, and Harry found himself in the midst of another memory.

This next image showed his father alone in his study, watching another Pensieve. Shrugging off thoughts about an endless succession of mirrors and becoming trapped in them, Harry edged up beside him and looked down.

A younger James was floating in midair, his robes dangling over his head as a spell suspended him by his ankle. Harry couldn’t hear sounds from the remembered Pensieve, but he could see the younger version of his father thrashing and struggling. He could imagine the humiliation that would be rising off him. James had never liked being embarrassed, which was one reason Snape’s insanity potion had worked as well as it had.

“How can there be anything good in him?” whispered the memory of the older James. “When he invented spells like that?”

Harry stared at his face in wonder. Does he really think that will convince me? I know that he and the other Marauders went after Snape, too. It's not just a one-sided grudge. And if Snape couldn't put it in the past and have done with it, then neither could he.

"He's not the right kind of man to be a father," James went on muttering, and then pushed the Pensieve away from him, and Harry was in another memory, though he did think before he went, If the papers aren't unbiased witnesses, what do you say about your own memories?

This time, James was standing on the very outer edge of Lux Aeterna's lawn, his arms folded around his chest as he frowned at the wards.

"Harry Potter," he said.

The wards went on glowing.

"Draco Malfoy."

A small spark from the wards, but they remained mostly quiescent.

"Severus Snape."

The wards snarled and animated, one of them projecting something that looked like a tooth or a scorpion's sting. James nodded, satisfied, and stepped back from the projection, which sank into the magic a moment later.

"They still consider him a Dark, evil bastard," he said.

Harry rolled his eyes. Has he forgotten that the house leans on him, and adopts his likes and dislikes? Of course it's going to forbid entrance to Snape. He practiced Dark magic, but so did Draco, and so did I. James's emotions are also a deciding factor in who gets to enter there.

And so it went, through memory after memory, as James apparently sought evidence for existence of some good traits in Snape, and

found nothing. Harry watched in growing disgust. He could appreciate his father's determination to make sure that, if he had to yield up care of one of his sons, he was yielding it to the right person, but his grudge would have made him blind to a good streak a mile wide. And Snape's was narrower than that, but still. Harry thought it was the kind he needed.

If he would only stop trying to talk to me about Lily, at least.

The memories ended with a sight of James writing the letter he'd sent along with the Pensieve. Harry pulled his head out with a sigh, and eyed the Pensieve for a moment, wondering if he should send it back.

No, he decided at last. I don't want him to think I'm rejecting what he tried to do for me. But I'd better make my letter utterly clear, and concise, and to the point.

He summoned a sheet of parchment and a quill, and wrote the letter braced on his Defense Against the Dark Arts book.

Dear James:

I'm afraid that I still think Snape is a good guardian for me. He isn't you, and he isn't Lily or Dumbledore, and at the moment, that's what makes him best. He would fight for me. He does make an effort to teach me to defend myself. He doesn't think that the war against Voldemort is more important than I am. He saved my life the other night. I keep telling you that I'm fine with him. I'll tell you again, and I hope that this time you'll listen to me, instead of deciding that your own son can't possibly know what he's talking about.

Harry.

Harry thought a moment, then added:

P.S. I wouldn't mind keeping up communication with you, but trying to force me to return is the worst thing you could do right now. I don't have a problem cutting off the communication, either.

He was not sure that was the right idea, but James had proven less hopeless than Harry had thought he would. He was also not Lily, and he'd shown no sign of knowing about Lily's and Dumbledore's plots. If he ever did reveal that he had, Harry would start burning his letters the moment they came, and would send no more of his own.

He went to the Owlery to post his letter, accompanied now and then by the golden gleam of voting owls. They paid no attention to him. Harry found it rather refreshing.

On his way back down, he paused by one particular sealed classroom, and swept a hand across the door, sighing.

He would need to speak with Snape about this.

Snape looked up in surprise as someone knocked on his office door. He hadn't sent a message to Harry, and no one else would willingly seek him out on New Year's Day.

"Enter," he said.

Harry opened the door. One look at his set jaw, and Snape knew he wouldn't have to summon his charge for a serious discussion.

He sat back and studied Harry in silence as the boy walked up to the desk and folded his arms. Snape said nothing. If Harry expected him to know what this was about, he didn't, and he had learned that speaking too directly of Lily was the way to make Harry bristle. Best to let him choose the direction of the conversation, and then Snape would seize and guide it.

"I want to know what the Meleager Potion does," said Harry.

Snape knew that he couldn't hide the widening of his eyes, but at least he controlled it soon, and no one but Harry was there to see it. "Why?" he asked.

"Because Fawkes didn't burn the potion and all your notes after all." Harry sounded utterly unembarrassed to admit that he'd lied. "There's a sample in a classroom upstairs, sealed with house elf magic. I

didn't dare to destroy it or unlight the candle floating in the middle of it, since I didn't know what would happen to Minister Fudge if I did. What would happen?"

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and reminded himself not to get angry. His goal today was to make Harry lose his temper, since he thought it was the only way to make him speak freely. Besides, he'd brewed the potion under the influence of the cold anger. That put him in the wrong immediately.

"It would burn him," said Snape. "Horribly. Painfully. From the inside out. And it would also burn years off his life, though he wouldn't know that. Even if I let the candle stay undisturbed for the rest of his life, that might be only three more years. Or five. Or ten. Everything depends on my will."

He looked at Harry, and found his charge frowning softly.

"How could you do that?" Harry asked.

Snape cocked his head to the side. You are not getting angry. You can't let yourself. "Do you mean, how could I brew a potion like that?"

"Yes." Harry studied him. "I know that you're capable of great things, wonderful things. You're certainly no stranger to compassion, or healing. Why would you brew a potion like that for the Minister, when he'd never done you any harm?"

That was going too far, Snape decided. "Do not play stupid with me," he hissed, rising to his feet. "You spoke what you believed to be my reasons under Veritaserum at my trial. You know that I did it to avenge the insult to you, to hurt him for hurting you. You may judge me as you like for the overweening pride of that response, for my stupidity in getting caught, for letting my hatred overtake my reason, but you will not pretend that you expected me to forgive him. You know what I am, Harry. I have forgiven no one who hurt you, unless they have paid a price already. Black has paid that price. None of the others have."

Harry's face was pale. This was leading towards territory where he didn't want Snape and Draco treading, Snape knew. He did not back up, though, and tried to keep the conversation on the Meleager Potion. "What should we do with it?"

"I could brew an antidote," said Snape reluctantly. He had come halfway around the desk, but forced himself to pause. "But there might be a problem having the Minister take it. It would be better to brew a neutralizer, instead, something that can turn the sample of potion we have into harmless water. I will begin on that soon." He scrutinized Harry in silence for a moment. "Will that satisfy you?"

Harry nodded. "So long as you think that Fudge will take no more ill effects from the potion."

"No. It works as I have told you." And it did. Snape was not holding back any secrets from his charge, not this time. He wanted his honesty reciprocated with honesty. "And I have no reason to use it, not again. The effects of the various poisons will remain in Fudge's body, but without my will to act on them, and without the candle burning to act as an anchor for my will, they will stay inert."

Harry relaxed slightly, but the tight lines around his eyes remained. "You still should not have done it," he said.

"I should not have," Snape agreed readily, and saw Harry blink, astonished, off-guard. He struck. "It was a stupid step to take, and you need a guardian who does not make stupid sacrifices. Just as I need a ward who does not make stupid sacrifices to free me. Did you answer letters from your mother so that Dumbledore would vote to depose the Minister and free me?"

The flush climbing Harry's cheeks answered the question. But he shook his head a moment later. "Don't talk about her," he whispered. "It's done."

"When I can no longer see the parts she's ripped out of your soul, then I will consider it done," said Snape. "You made me swear not to hurt her, Harry, and I have not done so. That she left Hogwarts alive testifies to that." Christmas night had been a sore test of his self-

control. He would have been just as happy to go to the hospital wing and end everything with a swift Avada Kedavra, but Harry did not need his guardian going to prison again. "You did not make me promise to leave you wounded and soul-hurt."

Harry's eyes flashed with an emotion only half fury. Snape recognized the panic behind it, too. "I don't want to talk about it," he managed to say. "You know a lot already. Draco knows even more. He heard what she said to me. It's enough that you know, isn't it? You don't need to go on talking to me about it. You don't need to go on looking at me."

"Harry—"

"I don't want you to look at me," Harry whispered. "Not this part of me. Promise that you won't."

Snape shook his head. "I will not give promises that I cannot keep."

Harry snarled at him. He'd cracked the boy's shell of cold indifference, Snape thought, but he had expected more anger than was there. Harry was frightened more than anything else. "I suffered. There. Is that what you want to hear? I did suffer, and now I'm not going to suffer at their hands anymore. They don't need to be punished. Both of you are too obsessed with casting blame. Draco just won't stop talking about it. Even when I beg him not to say a word about Lily, he still wants to reassure me that my magic isn't foul."

"Is that what she said to you?" Snape asked quietly. If he had known that Christmas night, he was not so sure that Lily would have lived, after all. Or she might have, but not as whole as she had been. There were spells that left no marks, and there was Obliviate.

"It doesn't matter." Harry looked torn between running and collapsing. "Please. Stop it. They don't need to suffer. There doesn't need to be vengeance."

"I would disagree," Snape murmured. "But I would say that, at least, there does need to be justice."

“What does justice do but create more pain? No. Leave it alone. I won’t have anything to do with her again, and I’ve already taken more than she deserves to lose. Leave it.”

Snape simply watched Harry, saying nothing else, until his charge got himself back under control. Harry shut his eyes and stood in silence for a time, then shook his head. When he opened his eyes, he was smiling, and seemed determined to forget the whole thing.

“Can I help you come up with a neutralizer for the Meleager Potion?” he asked.

Snape nodded. It was not time to push him on talking, he thought. Not yet.

But he did not believe that Harry was right. If nothing else, he had left enemies alive behind him, and that was not a Slytherin thing to do. And there should be justice, at least, if there could not be vengeance. And there was always the chance, faint though it seemed right now, that the Wizengamot might someday force Harry back into the control of his blood parents.

Snape’s gaze strayed often as they worked, going to the cauldron of clear Pensieve Potion in the corner of the room. Not in a glass container, it was not yet ready to record memories, and Snape would not have used it on Harry anyway. But on a willing person who wanted to see Harry’s mother suffer, and who knew more than Snape did about what she’d said?

I shall have to see whether Draco is willing to give me some of his memories.

Rufus lifted his head from a half-doze and blinked. The tower was ringing like a plucked bell, and there were no empty perches now. The last of the voting owls had returned, then.

He nodded at Amelia, who stood up and said, “Release the ballots.”

Responding to the voice of a candidate, the owls opened their beaks and contracted their bellies. Ballots rained out of them, flying into two

neat, precise piles. One would bear his name, Rufus knew, and the other Amelia's name.

In silence, they counted the ballots, each taking their own pile first. Rufus felt his heart speeding up when he passed two thousand, but he kept quiet. He recorded the final number by carving it on the floor of the Tower with his wand when he was done.

Six thousand eight hundred two.

Then he moved over to Amelia's pile, while she moved over to his, and they counted again. Amelia had five thousand six hundred nine votes.

Rufus felt an odd light-headedness welling up in him, though he'd both eaten and slept since they climbed up to the Tower, and he'd expected, partly, to win. He leaned back, took a deep breath, carved his estimated number of her votes into the floor, and then shifted the pile of ballots to the side so that he could see Amelia's number. It was off by a few, but only by ones, not tens. She agreed mostly with him.

The owls uttered a faint, chiming hoot, signaling that the acceptable procedure had been fulfilled. Then they turned to face Rufus, bowed their heads to him, and froze in place until the next time they would be needed.

He looked over the ballots and found Amelia smiling gently at him.

"Congratulations, Rufus," she said, and rose from the floor, groaning as she popped a muscle in her back. "I think I knew it would happen. Not everyone voted, of course, but your victory is decisive." She held out a hand, and Rufus strode over to assist her. "Which of those changes you were talking about are you going to implement first?" If she felt any disappointment, she hid it well.

Rufus lingered a moment, to look at the owls and then stare out over the lights of Muggle London. His heart was beating fast, and he still could not quite believe he was the new Minister of Magic.

Then he thought of the changes Amelia spoke of, and he smiled, and he believed it.

“First,” he said casually, “I’m sacking Kingsley Shacklebolt. He’s put loyalty to a Lord above loyalty to the Ministry or the law, and the one thing I am not going to have is Lords mucking about in my Ministry.”

Amelia laughed at him. Rufus didn’t see why. It really was his Ministry, now, and people had to learn that he had no truck with Lords.

Chapter Forty-One: Spikes in the Head

"I can't do it." Weasley's whining voice grated on the ears, Draco thought, as he sat on one of the desks and swung his legs back and forth. He, of course, had performed the spell that Harry was trying to show the others right the first time. His major entertainment now was watching Weasley, rolling his eyes, and trying to get Harry to roll his eyes along with him. He was irritated that Harry so far appeared inclined to do anything but that.

"Sure you can, Ron." Harry's voice was patient. He reached out, gently scooped Weasley's wand out of his hand, examined it a minute, and then chuckled. "That's it. You weren't holding it with the right tension in your wrist. Try again, but this time make your hand tense." He gave it back, and Weasley clumsily tried to manhandle his wand into the correct position, which Draco had learned just by watching Harry.

He watched Harry now, and calmed himself down by remembering that Harry couldn't possibly understand how his closeness to Weasley and some of his remarks might be interpreted—as flirting. Weasley didn't seem to take it that way, thank Merlin, but then, his gaze was always tracking Granger and that insufferable prat Smith. Smith was whispering in Granger's ear. She laughed. Draco had to admit she had a nice laugh, or he would have admitted it if he were interested in anyone but Harry. Weasley seethed with poorly concealed jealousy. Harry, oblivious Harry, went right on showing Weasley what he had done wrong with the spell.

"There," he said, stepping away. "Try it now."

Weasley gestured forward with his wand. "Incendio!"

This time, a cloud of fire sprang out of the tip of his wand and grew quickly, rolling around in several directions before it hit the wards Harry had set up to protect the furniture. Harry did a nonverbal Finite Incantatem before turning to grin at Weasley. "There you go! That wasn't so hard after all, was it?"

Weasley blinked stupidly at his wand. "No, I guess not," he said, and then darted another glance at Granger and Smith. His jealousy went back to blasting like raw, cold wind across Draco's face. Draco was just as grateful that he couldn't feel his own jealousy over Harry, not when it was one of the more unpleasant sensations.

Harry leaned back against the desk nearest Weasley and smiled at him. On his way to smile at Smith and Granger, he caught Draco's eyes, and his expression widened into a grin.

That's it, Draco decided. He'd felt far too much of Harry's slowly bleeding emotions these past few weeks, as Harry struggled to bury what had happened at Christmas and Draco struggled to get him to talk about it. Harry wouldn't do it, but in the meantime, he felt pain and self-doubt and other emotions that made Draco wish he had the Muggle bitch in front of him, promise to Harry or no promise. He didn't know that he was assaulting Draco's empathy the way he was. Now, with his happiness beaming out of him in a rush of pleasure that nearly weakened Draco's limbs, the difference was palpable, and he should always be that happy, or at least he should have a fair chance.

I'll need to tell him. They would have some quiet time in the morning, since it was Saturday and Vince always went to breakfast early on Saturday, to feast on the more abundant food, while Blaise had been spending every spare weekend minute with his little crush lately. Harry would find it hard to pretend that Draco was feeling someone else's emotions when they were alone in the bedroom.

"All right, Hermione, Zacharias?"

"Of course, Harry," drawled Smith, putting his chin on Granger's shoulder. She blushed. Draco sneered. That does nothing for her complexion. "I think it's Malfoy that's having trouble."

Harry turned towards him, eyebrows raised, concern washing from him like the scent of honeysuckle.

Draco half-closed his eyes to enjoy the sensation, barely hearing the answers he gave to Harry's questions. Maybe it's time to tell him something else important, too.

Harry dreamed.

“But, my lord, I don’t understand.” That was a desperate whine that Harry had already come to associate with Rabastan, for all that he didn’t dream about the man very often. He was shivering on the floor in front of Voldemort’s makeshift throne now. Harry thought they were in the same house as the one Voldemort had chosen for his conversation with Rosier and Bellatrix before sending Rosier to kill Lucius Malfoy, but this was a different room. Rather than having a comfortable fireplace before which the Dark Lord and his snake could relax, it was high-arched and felt cold, with a dim ceiling showing far above their heads. Nagini was slithering restlessly about, and for all that Harry knew he was safe and not really there, he drew back into the shadows each time she slid past the doorway where he crouched.

“I did not expect you to.” Voldemort’s voice was growing angrier. “I expect you to obey, Rabastan.”

“But it is—” Rabastan abruptly stopped his complaint. Harry edged to the side a bit, keeping a wary eye on Nagini, and saw the way the Death Eater had his eyes clenched shut, shivering, as though he had just escaped saying something fatal.

“Yes, Rabastan?” Voldemort hissed a command in Parseltongue, and Nagini swayed eagerly to his side. “You had something to say?”

“No, my lord,” Rabastan whispered. “It is a brilliant plan. Of course it is. And of course I will succeed at it.”

“I do hope so, Rabastan,” said Voldemort. “Considering that you have a month to prepare, and that you will have no other duties in that time, I expect this to be carried off perfectly. On certain things, we must wait on the sun—” a mad laugh “—but in others, we may have our own way. There is nothing quite like causing our enemies worry and pain, would you agree?”

“No, my lord.” Rabastan dared to lift his head and give Voldemort a sickly smile. “Nothing like it.”

Voldemort was silent for a moment, and Harry wondered what he was thinking. Nagini appeared to conclude that he had no more tasks for her, and uncoiled from the side of the chair like a restless whip, crossing the floor with liquid speed.

She came towards the doorway where Harry crouched in his animal shape.

Harry opened his mouth and hissed, but he kept the noise soundless. He had no reason for the fear suddenly making his body tremble. No one in the dreams had ever shown a sign of realizing he was there. Granted, he hadn't touched any of them, but since they had no reason to suspect an intruder, they didn't go out of their way to brush into random corners, either. Nagini had reached the doorway, but was using her long body to describe figure eights in front of it. She showed no inclination to venture further.

Harry continued to watch her, since Voldemort stayed silent. Nagini's tongue flicked out and tasted the air.

Then she paused, her body stiffening as though it had turned to marble. Harry felt his heartbeat pick up, shaking his small body as it could never shake his normal human one.

Nagini turned her head towards him, slowly, and hissed. Harry knew she would have no reason to suspect that anyone other than her Lord could understand the message she gave. "There is an intruder here in dream-form, Lord. Not quite a ghost, but not quite an imaginary presence, either."

"Rabastan!" said Voldemort. Harry crouched, his claws shot. He growled, and this time didn't bother to keep the sound noiseless. Nagini didn't seem to hear him, but she slid closer, and her tongue flicked again, and this time her hiss would have been a foul obscenity if she were speaking in English.

"My lord?" Harry could see Rabastan lift his head, though he didn't dare take his eyes off Nagini in order to observe his expression. The great snake slithered closer and closer to him, flinging loops of her body over the floor. Harry crouched lower.

"There is an intruder here," Voldemort said. "Nagini says so. Follow her, find him, and kill him for me."

"As my lord commands." Rabastan sounded startled, but eager. He came around the chair with his wand drawn, and Harry knew that he could cast curses which would hurt him if they landed.

Harry decided, reluctantly, that he would learn nothing of any further use tonight. He was better off backing out of the dream. He turned, waited until Nagini's head looked a bit to the right of him, and then sprang into the air as he had when he tore the dream to shreds so that he could warn the Malfoys. His claws reached out and rent—

Air. He fell back to the room of the deserted house with a thump.

This time, Nagini seemed to feel the vibrations. She pointed her head at him and uttered a long, satisfied hiss, then lay down on the floor and came straight for him. Rabastan followed, casting a few hexes to the left and right of Nagini for the look of things.

Unsure, despairing, Harry sat up and tried as best as he could to ready himself for battle in an unfamiliar body, against an enemy whose capabilities to hurt him in this form he knew nothing about.

I really do need help.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

Harry turned his head sharply. Draco stood beside him.

Draco had felt pain for some time, but it hadn't been quite strong enough to bring him permanently awake. He kept rising to the surface of his sleep, muttering, blinking, resolving to get out of bed and wake Harry up, and then sliding back beneath the surface. He could wake Harry in the morning. Harry didn't even like to talk about his dreams; he'd gone right back to incommunicative silence on that as on most other things. It drove Draco mad, but if Harry would just turn his back on sincere concern anyway, there was no reason for him to lose sleep over it.

Then he felt a surge of pain and panic, and he reached out. His empathy located the emotions in Harry, and he wanted to soothe them if he could.

Unlike most other times, he didn't encounter conscious barriers when he reached out towards Harry. He always knew which were his own feelings and which were someone else's; he had been careful to concentrate on that when the first books he studied mentioned how often empaths were lost in a whirlwind of emotions and had their minds tangled with their unwilling targets'. This time, though, he slid across what seemed no more than empty air and through a wall of swirling mist, and then he opened his eyes and saw what Harry saw.

They stood in an abandoned house, with just enough light to see by; Draco couldn't tell if it came from a spell or a distant fire. In front of them was a dark floor with an immense snake moving over it, and a wizard following her. And beside him was Harry, thinking, I really do need help.

"Why didn't you say so before?" Draco asked aloud in exasperation, and then looked at Harry, who was staring back at him. He blinked. Harry wasn't human here, but a grayish cat with long, nervously shifting legs. His feet bristled with fur, as though he were about to go sliding through snow. His black-tufted ears turned towards the sound of Draco's voice, and a short, black-tufted tail lashed back and forth in shock.

Draco didn't have time to question why Harry was in animal form here. The snake seemed to lose whatever trouble she had with sensing them, and slid forward. The wizard behind her, whose face Draco didn't recognize, lifted his wand and cast a curse at them that Draco most definitely did recognize.

If he can use his wand in a dream, then I can, Draco thought, and found his wand just where he had left it when he'd gone to sleep, tucked into the waistband of his robe. He drew it and cast the spell that Harry had taught them today. "Incendio!"

The fire spread out ahead of him and consumed the curse the wizard was flinging; that was its primary function. The wizard cursed, slowed, and began skirting them, obviously trying to figure out some spell that would get past the guard of this stranger, and how the stranger had got here in the first place.

Draco turned to grin down at Harry, only to realize that Harry was no longer at his side. He had jumped, and now he was riding the snake's back, his mouth and his paws clamped on its body, biting and kicking and stabbing. The snake let out a shriek and reared back, trying to crush him in its coils.

Draco took a step forward and aimed his wand, carefully, but was forced to lower it. There was no way that he wasn't going to hit Harry, with both cat and snake writhing and hissing and growling all over the floor. He had to try something else, and he thought he knew what he should try.

He had to take care of the wizard first, though, and he spun to face him. "Speculum Ardoris!" He didn't think this fool would know how to destroy Harry's version of the spell right away, and from the startled oath he gave as the Flame Mirror popped up around him, he was right.

Draco turned and ran like hell for the snake. He probably needed to be near to try what he was going to try.

The hall wavered around him several times—Harry trying to wake up, Draco guessed. Then it firmed, and Harry shrieked in pain. Draco looked up sharply to see the snake's fangs caught in his shoulder.

Draco panicked, but beat it back. A fearful empath was one of the things that his books had taught him to fear. He would pick up more emotions in such a sensitive state, and spiral further and further towards losing himself. He would have to act now.

He reached out and slid through the barriers between his own mind and those of Harry's again, surging into a sea of emotions. They were so familiar that he could orient himself easily. His own emotions,

Harry's in their strength and power, and another set of them, quite close and busily at work.

Draco thought quickly, I'm in Harry's mind, in his dream. Everyone else is in his dream, too, however real it must be. And that means that I ought to be able to reach their minds, too, by virtue of being inside his mind already and sharing dream-space with them.

It was a weak theory, but it was the best one Draco had, and he acted on it, sliding out of Harry's mind and into the snake's.

It worked. Draco could feel the emotions churning around him, anger and fear and protectiveness towards her master, and he knew her name, Nagini, and he knew that a few more bites would subdue this strange cat and bring him before her master. Her master had not sensed the intruder, but she had. Wonder surged, suspicion as to how many times he had watched.

A snake's emotions were simpler than a human's, Draco found. He was almost reading her thoughts, which was something that didn't happen with Harry or anyone else he had practiced his empathy on.

She could sense Harry. Harry's dreams about visiting the Dark Lord were probably not going to stop any time soon.

That meant she needed to die.

Draco took a deep breath and reached for his wand. He hoped his physical movements were working, since he couldn't see or sense to guide his body; his own sensations were all bound up in Nagini's mind. "Defensor vindictae," he said, the same Dark defensive spell he had used when Harry fought the dragons.

The black force surged around him. Draco knew the eyes were watching him, waiting for a command, but he couldn't see them. He could only clasp his hands into fists and then smash them together, indicating that the spell was to crush Nagini to death if it was at all possible.

He felt the spell move forward, a wave of freezing pressure, and then begin to work. Nagini felt pain. Draco felt it, too, but he thought he could bear it. He was too caught up in his own savage joy at protecting Harry to worry much about it.

Then claws hooked into his thigh, and someone hissed urgently near his ear, and he was dragged out and up and away through a madly flickering hall. Draco cried out in protest. If they left now, then he couldn't know for certain if Nagini would die.

A sharp yank, and an even sharper pain from below, and then they had broken the surface and were rising steadily out of the realm of sleep.

Harry was swearing even before he sat up and blinked away the usual flow of blood coming from his scar. He swabbed furiously at it, then rolled over and out of the bed. He could hear Draco's curtains rustling. He cast a Silencing Charm around the area with a wave of his hand. They didn't need any witnesses to what was about to happen.

"Draco!" he said.

"Harry!" Draco said back, in almost the identical tone, as he tumbled out of his own bed and stood blinking on the cold stone floor.

Harry stepped onto one of the thick rugs, hoping Draco would follow suit. He had already hurt Draco badly enough when he dragged him into his dream. He didn't need him getting frostbite on top of that.

"What in the name of Merlin did you think you were doing?" he yelled. He resisted the urge to wave his arms, though suddenly he understood why people made the gesture. At least it let some of the excess emotion go. "I can't believe that you took that risk! You could have died, and in a place that I didn't even know was real or not, and if you'd stayed in her mind when she died, then you definitely would have died, you moron! Don't you know anything about your own empathy?"

"I know that I've been feeling your emotions bleeding through your damn stoic exterior for three weeks now!" Draco yelled back at him. His face was flushed, his eyes glittering with tears. It was a little like the look he had given Harry after receiving his Christmas gift, but Harry was pretty sure the opposite feelings to those of generosity and joy motivated Draco now. "And I can't say anything about it because you won't fucking talk about it! And now you've been having dangerous dreams, and you could have died, too, and you needed my help, and you're regretting the danger you involved me in? This wouldn't have happened if you'd just—"

Abruptly, his face changed, and he reached out insistently, pulling at the shoulder of Harry's pyjama top. Bewildered, Harry let him, and saw only relief on Draco's face. He looked down, and saw unbroken skin.

"She bit you," Draco breathed. "I thought the wounds might have come with you from the dream." Then he frowned. "Does that mean that I didn't really kill Nagini, since I only did it in the dream?"

"I heard Voldemort hiss as we left," Harry said. He didn't want to reveal this, in case it inspired Draco to try further moronic exploits in his dreams, but he didn't think he could lie, either. "He was calling for her. If she wasn't dead, she was at least so badly wounded that he couldn't contact her mind anymore, or use whatever version of the familiar bond really exists between them."

Draco beamed smugly at him. Harry was preparing words to take the beam away when his eyes narrowed and he said, "And you are the one who was having insanely dangerous dreams and never bothered to tell me about them."

"That never happened before!" Harry argued, fighting the urge to back away from the murderous rage on Draco's face. "That was the first time she sensed me. I swear. I don't know what was so different this time."

"Yes, well, if I killed her, it won't happen again." Draco reached out and caught Harry's hand in a death grip. "I didn't choose to jump into the dream. I felt your pain, and I was swept in when I tried to comfort

you. That means that you don't need to blame yourself, Harry. But it means that we're connected, too. You can't deny that any more. You can't set up some barrier to keep me out." He was speaking quickly, as though he thought Harry would manage to convince him otherwise if he allowed him to talk. "I think it would be better if I know exactly what's going on in your dreams, so that I can defend myself if I'm going to be a regular guest in them. And I think it'd be best if you tell me exactly why you're still bleeding emotions all over the place, weeks after you claimed you were healed of what that bitch of a woman did to you."

"I did ask you not to talk about her," said Harry, turning his head away, preparing to draw his emotions in after him. He thought he'd found a way to block some of Draco's empathy and give him peace, a variation on the Occlumency barriers that Snape used to keep Voldemort from reading his thoughts.

Draco grabbed his shoulders and shook him. The physical effort definitely distracted Harry from putting up barriers, and he glared at Draco. Draco caught and held his eyes with an intensity that Harry couldn't remember seeing from his friend before.

"I feel those emotions anyway," Draco snapped at him. "I can feel the barrier you've been using, Harry, but it's not enough."

"Then I don't understand what you want me to do!" Harry twisted in Draco's grasp, trying to get away. He could feel the panic rising. If he leaned back, if he let himself take comfort, there was the possibility that he might break down. And if he broke down, then he would have to let some of his emotions go. And if he let some of his emotions go, then there was the possibility that he might encounter that sadism he knew now lay just under the surface of his conscious thoughts.

"Talk to me," said Draco, pulling him towards him so that Harry's head rested on his shoulder. "Heal the wounds, and then they won't be bleeding anymore, and I won't feel bad, and you won't, either." His hand skimmed Harry's back, so lightly that for a moment Harry hoped he'd let him go, but then it tightened. "It's so practical, Harry. Whether or not I loved you, I'd want to do this, as long as I had the empathy,

so that we'd both stop feeling bad. Surely you can see that? Surely you can see it's only the sensible thing to do?"

Harry twisted again. He was still a bit shorter than Draco, though not by much anymore, but he had some training in physical fighting that Draco didn't. If he could only get the right half of his body completely free, and stop the stupid tears now blinding him, he could run away.

Draco murmured in his ear, "Come on, Harry. I can feel what you're suffering." He sounded as if he were about to start sobbing himself. "I know that you don't care about your own pain, but you care about other people's, don't you? I know that you wouldn't want to go on inflicting wounds on me, even if they're the kind of wounds that no one else can see."

Harry didn't know when he'd started to cry, but it terrified him. Panic and sorrow were wild emotions, like rage. He might end up summoning that deadly rage again if he pursued these emotions long enough.

"Hush," Draco whispered. "Harry, calm down."

"I'm trying!" Harry struggled furiously to regain his self-control. He could do it. He had to be able to do it, if he wasn't to explode in some shameful way again. He couldn't believe what he'd done to his mother, once he regained some perspective. What she'd said to him was awful, but how did striking back with his magic, which she didn't have any of any more, make him any better than she was? How would wielding his magic over less powerful wizards make him any better than Voldemort? And he'd known, he'd known, that talking about things like this would send him dangerously close to the emotional edge. His mother's letters had had the power to do that. So it was better not to talk about her, or about anything that had happened that night, and then he wouldn't let his magic loose in an orgy of either fury or self-blame.

And no one else will stare at me, either, in pity or disgust. That would be good. And no one will try to hurt her. It would be one thing if they would just confine themselves to hurting me, but they would hurt her, too. I can't let this go on spreading.

But it appeared that he'd been hurting Draco while thinking he'd protected him, and that just encouraged him to cry further.

I don't know what to do. No matter which way I turn, I'm going to hurt someone, or encourage someone to get hurt.

"Hush, Harry. I've got you."

Harry clawed his way out of the maelstrom of his emotions by focusing on physical sensation. That sensation was Draco's arms locked on him, one around his waist, one around his upper back. They were sitting on the floor, leaning against the skirt of Draco's bed. Draco cradled him so close there was no way that he would miss the tremors shaking Harry, and whispered into his ear. At first it was those same few words, over and over, but when Harry looked up at him, knowing his own face was probably sick with fear and confusion, they altered.

"I promise, I promise, that I won't do whatever it is that you fear I'm going to do. Cause pain to other people, isn't it? I promise, Harry, I—"
"Draco shuddered as though the words were torn out of him. "I promise by Merlin and my magic not to hurt your mother, never to hurt her. If that's what you need to be safe with me and trust me, I promise it."

Harry blinked. Stunned surprise slid over his emotions and numbed all of them for a moment. That had been something he wanted, and thought none of his allies would ever give, so it was useless and stupid to request it from them against their wills.

Then relief crawled like sunlight where the surprise had been, and melted away its mist. Harry felt his breathing calm. He stopped struggling, and studied Draco's face for a moment. He no longer felt as if he were about to destroy the room with his magic. "Why?" he asked quietly.

"Because you matter more to me than she does." Draco arched an eyebrow, as if Harry had asked him in what direction the sun rose. The silent of course was so strong that Harry could feel it ringing in

the chambers of his skull. "I won't pretend to like her, but it's obvious to me now that you're not trusting anyone because you fear your revelations might just encourage that person to get angrier against your mother. So just cast her out of the equation. It's not like she matters. Besides, I heard everything, Harry. So you don't need to tell me about it. I just want to speak with you about it, and hopefully prevent pain to both of us." He met Harry's eyes full-on, his own eyelids fluttering with nervousness. "I swear, you matter more to me than anything or anyone else."

"Even with the Dark magic that I poured out that night?" Harry whispered.

"You prat," said Draco, and then hugged him tightly enough to grind breath out from between Harry's ribs. "You were worried about that? Of course I was afraid, but I was afraid for you and not of you. You must have known that, or you wouldn't have come back to us at all."

Harry closed his eyes. Perhaps, perhaps, just perhaps, if it was like this, he could speak without perfect self-control and not cause a magical disaster in doing so. "I'm so tired, Draco," he whispered. "Tired of pretending nothing's wrong, tired of thinking about what people would think of me if they realized that surge of Dark magic was me and I wanted so badly to hurt someone else, tired of worrying about what will happen to my mother if I do say something to Snape or Hawthorn or your mother."

"You don't have to be." Draco's voice was low, but Harry thought he could have heard it if trumpets were sounding in the room. "You have at least one person who's sworn that he won't hurt Lily, Harry. And I'm not afraid of anything you tell me. I never will be."

Harry swallowed. He thought, somewhere under the spinning chaos that occupied the surface of his mind, that he shouldn't let Draco give him this. It was too big a sacrifice. How could Draco possibly care for him more than anything else? What about his parents, his own life, his own future that he would have after the War that Harry fully expected he himself would die in?

But he needed it too much, at the moment, to reject it. And the thought of having someone whose loyalty was to him first was...

Too attractive to give up right now.

"Thank you," he whispered, and relaxed. Exhaustion was creeping over him. "But do we have to talk about it right now?"

"No," Draco said. "So long as you understand that we will talk about this, Harry, and that you can't get away from it by pretending that you've forgotten what happened when we wake up."

"I know that," Harry whispered. He was drowning in rich warmth. The terror of trusting someone else was somewhere beneath that, like gulfs of space through rays of sunlight. "Do we have to move?"

Draco laughed in his ear. "We do, or we'll both have cricks in our necks in the morning. Up you get."

He shifted Harry without taking away from the warmth, somehow, and crawled into his bed with him. Fawkes was sitting on the edge of the mattress this time, and radiated warmth at them, coruscating gold touched with blue. Harry felt his eyes slide relentlessly closed. He didn't think he would have any dreams this time, either visions of Voldemort or the more ordinary nightmares he'd had of the confrontation with Lily.

"Hush," Draco whispered in his ear. "Relax."

Harry turned his face towards him without opening his eyes. "You'll be here?"

Draco's voice this time was, for some reason, fiercely triumphant. "I'll be here, Harry. I promise."

"Good," said Harry, and drifted away on waves of fire and phoenix song. Fawkes was crooning a lullaby that gave Harry visions of golden chicks hatching from scarlet eggs, and singing to greet the dawn.

Imperio.

Harry stiffened his shoulders, but kept walking. He could feel the Imperius Curse drifting about his head. This wasn't the first time it had happened in a few weeks, but always before, it had faded immediately, as though it had only been a test run. Harry was sure that this was the same person who had cast the Curse to madden the dragons in the First Task, and he wanted to see if he could track down who it was, this time.

He caught a glimpse of a shadow following him, and when the voice in his head said, Turn into the side room and wait, he did so. The shadow strode in confidently a few moments later.

Moody. Rosier said to beware of him.

Harry stood as if passive under the Curse, breathing softly, letting Moody examine him. Moody shook his head after a moment.

"Can't tell why it's so important to know everything about you," he muttered to himself. "You'd think the Ministry would have learned their lesson already, and there's been enough demonstrations at Hogwarts to fill a bloody Prophet all by themselves. Why?" He began walking around Harry at a slow pace, examining him again. Harry listened, in hopes of finding out what he was up to, but Moody only muttered generalities, without revealing whether he really was connected to Voldemort somehow, or to Fudge, or to someone else.

Harry caught sight of the gleam of the silver collar around his neck, and suspected it would be useless to try Legilimency on Moody himself.

And I can't talk to Snape about it because I don't want him doing anything stupid, and it's useless trying to talk to Dumbledore about anything. Who can I tell about this, someone who will promise to go at my own pace, until we can figure out what's really happening?

The thought hit him hard enough to make him smile, and Moody paused and stared at him.

Draco, of course.

Harry let his eyes blink, and he looked up at Moody and asked in a voice that he kept deliberately calm, "What are you doing here, sir?"

Moody pulled his wand at once and aimed it. "Obliviate."

Harry bounced and destroyed the Memory Charm on his Occlumency shields as he had when Lockhart tried to use it on him in second year, but pretended to the glazed eyes and gaping mouth that Moody would expect from the Charm. The professor studied him for a moment, then grunted. "Enough wandering around the halls, Potter," he said. "Go back to your common room now."

"Yes, sir," Harry said in a dazed tone, and trotted off, glancing back only once. Moody was sipping from the flask that hung at his hip, and frowning.

I hope Draco's there, Harry thought, walking faster. Maybe it is a bit selfish, but I like having someone else to tell about these things. "You wanted to see me, sir?" Draco opened Snape's office door and peered warily around it at his Head of House.

"Yes, Draco." Snape didn't bother pretending to courtesy or shyness. "It's about Mr. Potter. Come in and sit down."

Draco nodded, shut the door, and walked over to the chair in front of the desk. At once, Snape set a clear bottle of silvery potion in front of him. Draco eyed it, then squinted at Snape. He knew it wasn't a kind of potion that he'd seen before, and he could say that with certainty. He was one of Snape's better students.

"This is a Pensieve Potion, a recent invention of mine." Snape folded his hands in front of him. "The Ministry has approved its use. In a glass bottle such as this, it will capture strong memories from the mind of another person, as directed by its creator. It can happen without the consent or knowledge of the person involved, but I would like you to know what I am doing, and to give me your permission. I want your memories of the night that Lily Potter came here, and what she said to Harry."

Draco blinked. "What do you intend to do with them, sir?"

Snape's eyes turned darker, and Draco fought the urge to shrink back in his chair. He'd seen his father in these moods, too, but, maybe because Lucius was more familiar to him, he didn't seem as purely Death Eater as Snape did in this moment. "For right now? Perhaps nothing. But I do not think it is wise to let Lily Potter go without paying for what she has done."

Draco felt a brief surge of longing. He could imagine the kinds of things that Snape wanted the memories for. He could imagine Lily drawn and quartered in front of the wizarding world—it was a shame that literal drawing and quartering wasn't practiced anymore, he thought, because it would make a fit punishment for her—and his body fluttered with pleasure at the image.

It's too bad. It's really too bad.

Draco met Snape's eyes and said, "No, sir."

Snape blinked, and his surprise traveled in an icy breeze across Draco's face. "And why not?" he asked after a moment, voice descending to a snapping hiss. "I thought you would have been quite as eager to see justice done for Harry as I am."

"I am, sir," Draco said. "But I'm more interested in seeing mercy done to him, and he needs the mercy of knowing that someone would never turn against him, in any way. I've sworn to be that person."

Snape cocked his head to the side. "If he took that oath from you under duress, Draco, you are in no need of keeping it."

Draco narrowed his eyes and rose from his chair. "How dare you," he said, noting in only mild shock that Snape had flinched. "How dare you think he is capable of anything like that. I gave this oath of my own free will. I am keeping it of my own free will. Find someone else to give you your memories. I won't turn against Harry like that. No, not even for his own good," he added, as Snape's mouth opened. "Goodbye, sir. I'm not telling him about this right now, because he

doesn't need the added stress of knowing his guardian's an idiot, but if you try anything without my or his consent, and I find out about it, I won't have any compunctions."

He shut the door hard behind him on his way out.

Chapter Forty-Two: Neither Snape Nor Harry Are Best Pleased

You must tread carefully.

Snape had heard that advice many times in his life—not always in those words, but the fancier words that most Slytherins brewed in their adult lives always boiled down to that warning. Tread carefully, or he'd be caught. Tread carefully, or he would give away what he wanted and bring in some stronger rival to defend it. Tread carefully, or he'd show his enemies what he was up to, and they would block it just to spite him. Tread carefully, or the Marauders would find and catch him.

“Severus, what is that disgusted expression on your face for?”

Snape snapped his eyes around to the side. McGonagall is too perceptive for her own good. “Nothing,” he said smoothly. “At least, nothing more than it is every day. Do you not become disgusted at the thought of teaching good-for-nothing brats who will never learn more than the basic rudiments of your art?”

McGonagall lifted her head. That was better, Snape thought. He preferred her when she played the part of the offended Gryffindor to that of the woman who had been almost put in his House. Gryffindors have no business seeing so clearly. “Transfiguration is a different kind of art than Potions, Severus, and you know it. Most of Potions is only following directions. But a student has to have a true passion to learn Transfiguration, and a keen eye to keep all the parts of an object or creature in mind.”

“If my art has less passion involved than yours, mine must at least be precise.” Snape finished the last of his juice and stood. He had never truly liked pumpkin juice, but he had become accustomed to drinking it for breakfast over the years. The last thing he wanted to do now was draw attention, and Dumbledore would notice if he stopped drinking it. “And that is the reason that so many of your little lion cubs stumble and fall when it comes to their OWL’s.”

McGonagall glared at him and muttered something about a snake poisoning their efforts, but Snape affected not to hear, and swept effortlessly on. Dumbledore's eyes were on his back the whole way.

Of course they were. I trod too heavily that night in his office when Harry confronted him.

That time was nearly a month ago now, with the last days of January trickling past, and still Snape had not thought of a way to use his Pensieve Potion, or to make the man pay. Without the memories from either Draco or Harry, he was effectively stuck. No one else had seen as much. No one knew as much. He would get the images from James or Lily Potter only by force, and he had good reasons for avoiding them—Lily because of his promise to Harry, James because he did not think he would be able to control his wand once he was in the same room with the fool.

It must be done, though, he thought, as he entered his classroom and heard the muffled snorts and giggles of the Gryffindors calm immediately. They knew he was never in a good mood during this double class with the Slytherins, and tried not to provoke him. They didn't seem to have learned yet that he didn't need provocation to take points from them.

He turned to face the class, and noticed Harry and Draco sitting near the front, side by side. That was a good sign, at least. Harry had worked by himself when they still regularly fought. Now he looked at Draco occasionally as if trying to guess when the other boy would come to his senses and run away, but he had at least one person to speak and listen to.

Snape had to admit that he wished that person could have been him, but he had made mistakes, and it would take Harry some time to trust him again. He was willing to wait.

You have made still other mistakes. You have not told him about the compulsion the book put on Draco yet.

Snape stilled his face, and snapped, "You will make the potion on page 53 of your text. Instructions are there. Begin."

He began stalking around the classroom, using the time to watch faces. Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode stood at once and went to fetch their ingredients together, Pansy listening intently to something Millicent was saying. The Bulstrode girl often found herself agitated lately, Snape knew. It was only natural, with her mother due to produce another child at the end of February. Pureblood pregnancies were rare and treasured things.

Vincent Crabbe leaned towards Blaise to share the instructions with him. Then he went to get the necessary materials. Blaise took the time to watch Harry and Draco. Snape had not yet reasoned out the complex expression that came over his face at such moments. He did not think the boy was jealous of the bond the two shared—if nothing else, he had a proclaimed girlfriend in the youngest Weasley spawn—but he did believe Blaise was weighing where his opportunities lay.

Not only Slytherins did that, Snape saw, as Harry stood in turn and a few Gryffindor heads pivoted to track him, the purebloods mostly. He had returned to find his charge at the center of more and more glances lately, the sun to capture more and more planets.

Draco surged up beside Harry. Snape permitted himself a small smile. The boy had not yet told Harry of his crush, or Snape believed he would have known it, but he was not inclined to pursue the deadline he had set on the telling. It was surprising enough that Draco had persisted in these feelings, when Snape had expected them to dissipate into the atmosphere.

Let things take their course. I do not believe that I can hurry them or change them. On the other hand, I believe Draco must give over soon. Normal people do not find true love at fourteen years old.

Were Harry and Draco normal?

Draco more normal than Harry, assuredly, Snape thought, as he finished pacing to the end of the classroom and turned around, but I will not let my own personal consideration of them end with my thinking they are too extraordinary. I might start uncritically believing

everything they say otherwise, and I cannot let that happen. Harry needs a parent. Draco needs someone who will not be carried away by his name and the thought of what his father once did. Both need limitations.

He paused abruptly as he began to make his way up past the Gryffindor tables. Connor Potter stared at him in silent, mute consideration, Weasley in open defiance. The Gryffindors were not entirely reconciled to having him back as their Potions teacher yet.

Two unconnected things had suddenly rolled together in Snape's mind, in a way they only had a habit of doing when he was in the middle of a potion.

"Five points from Gryffindor for having an expression unsuitable for addressing a professor on your face, Weasley," he said, to show that his pause had a point, and went on walking towards the front of the classroom.

Limitations. Yes.

It will take some work, but not so much as all that. I believe one advantage I have in this dance is that my partner is all too willing to guide my faltering steps, and believe they come only from weakness and not some overarching plan. He is too used to believing that he controls everything and everyone.

"Severus! Come in, my dear boy, come in."

Snape could hear the pleased tone in the Headmaster's voice. Dumbledore would believe that he was luring him back, since, after all, Snape had requested this interview of his own free will.

Come, Snape told himself. It won't do to be too eager. And you must meet his eyes at some points during the conversation, or he really will start suspecting that you have something to hide.

"Headmaster," he muttered, taking care to sound as though only necessity had forced him to the title, and he hated it. He darted his head up in a quick gesture, and then brought his eyes back down

again as he all but slunk to a chair in front of the desk. He had some practice in radiating resentment and even hatred of his lot, and he knew Dumbledore would be drinking in those emotions, believing them all the more eagerly since he wanted to think that this was the beginning of a revolution in Snape's feelings.

"Please, dear boy, call me Albus."

Snape sat down, still keeping his head bowed. "I don't think I'm quite ready for that yet." To his secret delight, the words were indistinguishable from Connor Potter's whine when he had given the blasted boy detention for ruining his potion.

Behind his surface emotions, he was raising his Occlumency shields—the shields that had fooled the Dark Lord, a most skilled Legilimens, as to his true allegiances for more than a year. Granted, Snape believed that the Headmaster was better at reading thoughts than the Dark Lord was. On the other hand, that desire to see only what he wanted to see would help blind him.

It was a dance, as so many things in Slytherin life were. And unlike pureblood rituals, this was the kind of dance Snape understood, the kind he was instinctively good at, the kind he thrived on. Idiotic Gryffindors would never believe that Slytherins took risks. They did, though, for the sake of a greater gain that could come from it.

This was of a piece with the risk that Harry had taken for him in the Wizengamot's courtroom when he went under Veritaserum, and Snape did not believe he could answer that statement of trust and faith with anything less than a similar statement of his own.

He raised his eyes and met Dumbledore's, bracing himself against the intense rake of that gaze.

He felt the light, probing touches of Legilimency. He rolled with them, deciding from moment to moment whether to open a shield and let Dumbledore through, to pretend not to notice him but keep him out, to notice and take offense. Any choice could be the wrong one, the one that would end the charade.

None of them were. Dumbledore continued to beam at him, and said, "I hope, Severus, that you will someday be ready to call me Albus again."

Snape sat a long moment in silence, then nodded, slowly. "Perhaps I shall," he said, and let the hollowness of old conviction and old despair ring in his voice.

He could feel Dumbledore relaxing. This was the Snape he knew, the one he'd dealt with since Snape had fled the Death Eaters and come to him in hope of a last sanctuary. He knew the human weaknesses of that man, the all-too-human faults and flaws and wants of him. He knew that Snape had done his stint as a spy as an act of atonement, but that he also resented Dumbledore for making him do it, when he could have stayed in safety at Hogwarts. There were debts and obligations and duties entangled in the relationship between them, too many to ever be untangled. Dumbledore would believe that the old rope had caught Snape's neck and was drawing him in again, half-cringing and half-growling, reminding him of how much he owed the old man.

He did not know that Snape's primary allegiance had changed, and that enabled him to cut the rope without regrets.

"What did you wish to talk to me about?" Dumbledore asked.

Snape blinked, slowly, as though he had lost himself in the past. He turned his head and stared at the far wall. He swallowed. "I wish to know your ultimate intentions regarding my ward," he whispered.

"Harry Potter, Severus." Dumbledore's voice was quick and pleased. "He has a last name. He has living parents. And that is part of your answer, as I am sure you suspected it would be. I intend that Harry someday be reconciled to his parents, if that can be done. I admit that after the fiasco on Christmas—"

That is one name for it.

"—I have less hope of it than ever. But I do not intend that any family be split apart forever. Lily has given so much to the cause of the war

against Voldemort, her elder son and her magic included. It was only by a miracle that Poppy managed to save her foot and keep it from joining the list of sacrifices as well. I always meant to give her back the family life she should have had when the war was done. There is every hope, now, that Harry as well as Connor will survive. I would see them living with their mother, peacefully, until they're of age, and then visiting her and kissing her with grandchildren in their arms someday."

Not while I live. In the name of Merlin and my magic, I will end the pain.

"And James?" Snape let the name sound as if it were being tugged out of him by a fishhook tangled in his guts. It wasn't difficult to summon that emotion.

"Ah, yes, James." Dumbledore sighed. "He has not been in communication with me for months, and so I do not know his mind as well as I could have claimed to, once. But he has given up much, too. You know that, Severus." Dumbledore sent him a chiding glance Snape didn't bother answering. "He gave up his position in the Aurors so that he could stay closer to and live with his family, protect them against any Death Eaters hunting them after Tom's fall."

I doubt it. From the memories Snape had sometimes encountered in Harry's mind during Occlumency training, he believed it far more likely that James Potter was a coward who had found the wide world too much to deal with. It would account for his shutting himself up in Godric's Hollow and then shutting himself up again in Lux Aeterna.

"He has not given up as much as Harry." The emotions that filled his voice were ones that Snape didn't have to feign, either. He was glad of that. A lie was always stronger when mixed with a bit of truth, the same way that iron forged into steel was stronger than when left alone.

"You continue to say that, Severus, but I do not think you mean it." Dumbledore leaned coaxingly forward. Snape felt an edge of compulsion in the old wizard's words, and bounced it with expert smoothness from his shields, winding it down to drown among the

quicksilver pools. It was a method that didn't alert Dumbledore to its having failed. "After all, Harry was a child, and he could not have known what he was giving up. James and Lily were adults. They yielded the whole world to their children, and to living with them and bringing them up a very certain way."

His words have almost no effect on me, now, Snape realized. He had moved beyond Dumbledore's voice as it seemed he had moved beyond the Dark Lord's when he left him in heart. The rhetoric that had once seemed so compelling beat against the walls of his mind and rolled down as rain would.

"I have seen Harry's training, Headmaster. I cannot believe that any result was worth that."

Dumbledore's eyes and smile grew brilliant. "Oh, yes, they were. He has such skills as he has never yet needed to call upon, and, more than that, he has the drive to learn that makes sure he will acquire more as he reaches the limits of the ones he has. And now that I believe his mindset has changed and his idea of sacrifice extended to the whole of the wizarding world, I can see where I went wrong. I was attempting to force him to love, and he already does. Even if he is not the fulfillment of the prophecy, he will do great things. Surely you can see, Severus, that any sacrifice was worth it to get him to that point?"

Dumbledore bore down with the heaviest compulsion he had raised yet, a clumsy touch that he would have disdained if he didn't need to be certain of winning, Snape thought. He hovered beyond it, drowned it, and marveled at how the words did not even raise a spasm of rage within him.

I have grown beyond that now. I know they are not true, and so there is no need to waste breath or time in fighting them. They are valuable only as a portrait of what Dumbledore is thinking.

"I know that I have often praised his skill in my Potions class," Snape murmured. It was the kind of admission that Dumbledore would expect him to make, the grudging turn back around to admit the truth of another's words without actually saying that that person had been right. Dumbledore would see it as the interaction of his compulsion

and Snape's essential personality. Snape did rouse himself enough to add, "That doesn't mean that he needed to learn everything that he learned."

"There are lessons I would change," Dumbledore said. "But in the main, Severus, I think you'll find that he knows everything he needs to know."

That will be enlightening, when I see it.

"Perhaps," said Snape, and then roused himself to sneer. "Do you really think that the boy will be brought near his parents again? I do not think he would stand for it. He vowed to tell his father that he did not want to speak with him again, I know."

Dumbledore winked. "Oh, but I have my sources, Severus, and I know that Harry is still writing steadily back to James. They exchange letters every few days. It is not something, but it is an open connection, and it shows that Harry would be willing to share his life with his blood family if he could be convinced they deserved it. He shall know the full story of his mother soon, I think, whenever he next wishes to contact her, and that should convince him."

Snape fought the urge to snarl. The boy did not tell me he was still writing his fool of a father!

But he was a Slytherin, and he rose beyond his immediate irritation and looked at the implications of Dumbledore's words. A source. Who? I do not believe that my Slytherins would be unaware of one of their fellows coming and going, reporting to Dumbledore about Harry without my knowledge. Someone would have hinted to let me know about it.

He had the answer in a moment, when he just bothered to exert himself.

The wards!

The Headmaster of Hogwarts could listen from the walls and doors of the building, if he wished to. It was not often that one made the effort;

the knowledge obtained that way was dizzying, and required constant monitoring, and constant drain on one's magic. Dumbledore had so many hooks in so many minds that he hadn't bothered with the wards in years. But, if he chose, he could renew the ties that bound the Headmaster to the school, and no one would know when he was listening from doors or walls, windows or portraits.

Snape wondered if Dumbledore knew about his plan already, then discarded the idea. He would have to act as if it were unknown, or he was lost. He had kept much of what he plotted in his own head, as it was the best way. And the best way to avoid much more scrutiny was to do exactly what he had done: come to Dumbledore and "prove" he could be trusted.

He looked away from the Headmaster and slipped a tone into his voice that Dumbledore was the only person ever to have heard. "I do not like to think of losing the boy, Headmaster. You know that I don't often become fond of people, and—" He shook his head as though he had said too much.

"I know, Severus, I know." Dumbledore leaned across the table and patted his hand. "But family is an important and sacred thing—in Harry's case especially, when he spent so many years of his life exclusively with them. You would not like to deprive him of them if he made the choice, would you?"

Yes, I would. If he made the choice to go back to them now, he would obviously be insane, and I would take appropriate steps.

"No, Headmaster," Snape whispered.

"I know that you, yourself, had a—more delicate relationship with your mother than you usually acknowledge," Dumbledore said, with the appropriate pause. "Not that Lily is Harry's only magical parent, but there are some similarities, I believe."

Thank Merlin for Occlumency. Snape calmly bolted down his rage, his unthinking reaction. He is trying to shove me off balance. The only thing I need do is not let myself be shoved.

"I did not hand that knowledge to you so you might turn it against me as a weapon, Headmaster," he said, and he snarled as he said it.

Dumbledore raised a hand, looking apologetic, but smug, if one were looking for it, in the relaxed lines about his eyes. "I am well aware of that, Severus. I am sorry." He paused for a moment, then said, "Was there anything else that you wished to speak about concerning Harry? You know my intentions now. I would still like to find some way to reconcile him to his blood family, but I acknowledge that the methods I was using did not work, and that it will take some time to find the ones that will."

"No, Headmaster." Snape stood up, keeping his face carefully lowered. It would not do for Dumbledore to see defiance in the crook of his neck or the tilt of his head now, not when he had done so well. "You know my own intentions. And I—can admit that yours might have their place."

If the world were entirely different. If Harry's family were not the nest of vipers they are.

"Good, Severus." Dumbledore smiled at him. "I do hope that you will come back and see me again at some point, as I look forward to speaking with you and do miss you when we have long times in between our chats."

How was I to chat with you these past few months, when I was in prison? Snape thought, but said, "Goodbye, Albus." Then he scowled, as though long habit had made the name slip out when he didn't intend it to.

He felt Dumbledore's intense delight as he left. Of course the Headmaster would be delighted. Snape had apparently played into his hands. He had fulfilled his expectations perfectly, and Dumbledore trusted too much to himself to think his expectations were false. Look at how badly his expectations had failed him in the affair with Harry, and yet he thought that Harry and his parents might reconcile even now.

Snape waited until he was in the dungeons, where he knew that certain subtle spells woven into the stone somewhat discouraged the Headmaster's wards. Then he drew the glass bottle from his pocket, and tilted it to catch the light. The silvery liquid of the Pensieve Potion shimmered with captured memories. If Snape had guided the conversation aright, and he thought he had, then those would be Dumbledore's memories of Harry's training. Snape knew he had often visited Godric's Hollow when the Potter boys were children.

Or when Connor was a child and Harry a young adult.

I do not yet know what I will do with these. I will be patient. But I know they will come in useful.

Check and mate, Albus. You should be more careful when you are playing with Slytherins.

Snape slid the bottle back into his pocket, scowling for the benefit of the wards, and strode rapidly down the hall.

Harry would be the first to admit that he didn't always see things straight the first time. He had mistaken Connor's incompetence for sweet, childish naïveté for a long time. He had mistaken Sirius's growing insanity, and then his possession by Voldemort, for changing moods in the man himself. He had believed his parents when they said that Peter was guilty, that all Slytherins were evil, that having any Dark power was the sign of evil. He didn't have some inherent gift to discern truth from falsehood.

He had the impression now that it had taken him an unconsciously long time to figure out that something was odd about the way Draco treated him, different than it had been.

Draco often touched him. Draco had always done that, and Harry had just accepted it as something he needed to do, a habit, like the way Hermione tugged on her hair when she was thinking hard. He hadn't thought it meant anything. What could it mean? It just happened.

Draco often seemed irritated when people interrupted him when he was talking with Harry. Draco had always done that. It was part of him,

signaling a childish desire to always have his thoughts heard first and foremost. Harry had even felt honored in that he was Draco's chosen listener. But if he had not been Draco's chosen listener, someone else would have been.

And now...now those two things, if nothing else, had altered. Draco still did them, but he did not do them in the same way. Harry couldn't see when the change had begun, but he noticed it now.

Draco touched him constantly: light brushes on the shoulder as he walked past, one hand swatting at his hair in the morning in a vain attempt to make it lie flat, a steering on the arm when Harry was about to bump into someone else in the crowded corridors. But now the touches were odd, soft, reverent, as if Draco didn't believe Harry existed in the same world that he did. Harry supposed that he could have excused that as a relic of his habit of fooling Draco with illusions—of course his friend would want to make sure he was solid—if not for the other thing.

Draco tilted his head and gave other people this look, now, when they wanted to speak with Harry. It considered them, judged them, and, most of the time, discarded them. Draco stepped aside without protest if he thought their presence important, but most of the time, he simply hovered, waiting impatiently for them to be gone so that he could claim Harry's attention again.

And now there was this thing.

Harry frowned at the glass serpent, which he had found in his trunk while he searched for a series of notes he'd taken on Dark creatures last year, to see if they would be any good in helping with the unicorns' web. It still shone blue, and while purple churned around the edges, indicating that Draco felt protective of him, the blue was predominant.

So far as Harry could remember, blue was not a color described in the spell that he had chosen to make Draco's bottle, and which Draco had imitated when making the glass serpent.

Harry shook his head and stood. They had no Divination, since Trelawney claimed to be sick today, and Draco was still in Ancient Runes. This might be one of the few times that Harry would ever have to sneak away to the library and research the blue color in peace.

Besides, I might as well look up unicorns while I'm there.

Harry settled the enormous tome, *Colors of the Soul: A Look at Common Methods of Aura-Reading*, carefully on the edge of the table. Madam Pince had stared hard enough at him when he carried the book off the shelf. He didn't want to drop it and prompt the fierce witch to drive him out of her library.

He flipped through the book, carefully skimming each page, looking for a mention of the spell he had used on the bottle. Other passages briefly caught his eye, but none of them seemed all that relevant.

...pale frost-blue is often believed to be an indication that somewhere a beloved is pining for his lover...

...Deep green as the color of a soul has several significant readings. One is that of a rich life about to come into its summer of plenty, as the hue is believed to reflect summer leaves. Another insists that the soul thus marked has a tendency to darkness, as that shade of green is of all of them closest to black...

...It was once believed that Seers saw souls in colors, but this is now generally believed not to be the case...

At last, Harry found the description of the spell, and shook his head when he saw it. The list of colors was considerably longer than the one he'd seen when reading a description of the spell the first time. Of course, the books in Diagon Alley wouldn't have had enough information. He settled down to read, resigned to looking for a time, since the list was enormous and split into subtle shadings, such as deep red-gold and pale lime-green.

To his shock, there was only one entry for blue in the whole of the list. The description after it made him fall deeper into shock.

Blue. Deep love; devotion.

Harry felt his throat dry out. His eyes stung with something that might or might not have been the beginning of tears. He settled the book from its slant into a flat position, a movement that didn't even make the table tremble but caused Madam Pince to scowl at him anyway, and then leaned forward. He felt disconnected from his body, and his arms shook with fine tremors.

I—

That's impossible.

Harry would have thought that it indicated the love of friendship, which Draco had already told him he felt several times, but there were other entries on the list for friendship, mostly under various shades of green.

Blue indicated romantic love.

But Draco can't love me like that, Harry thought, and raked a hand through his hair. It wouldn't make sense. I—people love each other in different ways, but they have to have a reason to fall in love with someone, even if they can't articulate them. You don't go around falling in love with every random person you meet. And Draco has absolutely no reason in the world to fall in love with me.

Harry could see why someone would love Draco; that was no problem. He was capable of fierce loyalty. His occasional fits of childishness were endearing once Harry got used to them. He could admit his mistakes, as he had after summoning Julia. He did things to change himself without bragging about it, like trying to learn pureblood rituals. He shone joy when he was happy, shone rage when he was angry, and in general acted like a living window on a marvelous land. Most people did, in Harry's experience—what he had said to Vera about finding most people wonderful was true—but Draco's soul-land was particularly vivid to Harry.

Harry could not imagine Draco giving that emotion to him, particularly because he had said, and Harry had understood too late, that he believed there was one perfect person for each witch or wizard. Harry was manifestly not perfect for Draco. He was manifestly not perfect for anybody. He grieved to think that Draco had trapped himself into thinking that he was, and wondered if he had done anything, in his ignorance, to encourage it.

He wants to love me in a moonlight sense.

Harry had learned little about pureblood marriage and joining rituals as a child, since that was not the kind of alliance he would ever make—he couldn't marry or join with someone, he wouldn't have enough time to do that and live for Connor—and not the kind of alliance his parents would ever have forced Connor into. He had read about the seven types of romantic love that ancient pureblood witches and wizards believed to exist, however, if only because they were mentioned constantly, and were one of the few beliefs that crossed the divide between Light and Dark.

There was shadow love, where one partner took care of the other. There was darkness love, where both partners were locked together in a self-destructive dance that usually ended with one or both of them dying—the great passions such as tragedies were built on. There was starlight love, where the love grew from the desire to make each other's lives easier and then traveled along in a cloudy mixture of light and darkness for all the lovers' lives long. Most arranged marriages and joinings aimed at producing starlight.

There was lightning love, where the emotion flared quickly and usually ended in elopements and whirlwind courtships, but then faded out and might leave the pair unhappily chained to each other for the rest of their lives. There was firelight love, which surged from friendship into warmth and slow, ordinary surrender to feelings, never achieving the heights of emotion that lightning or darkness love might, but also never going out or dying.

There was moonlight love—the perfect, pure, blissful kind of love that simply erupted one day and grew stronger all the time, shining

forever, always there even when the moments seemed darkest, as the moon was there even when she waned.

That was the love that Draco wanted, and it was the kind of love that Harry did not truly accept. If a marriage or joining broke apart, that did not mean it was imperfect. The partners might find happiness elsewhere. They might be perfectly happy alone. They might marry or join again, and still make a mistake. Harry refused to believe that, of all the variety of souls he had seen already, the only possible choices for each of them were perfection or unhappiness.

And then there was sunlight love.

Harry picked up Colors of the Soul and carried it back to its place on the shelf, unmindful of Madam Pince's glare now. He walked down that aisle and up another until he found the book he was looking for, Light Lady and Dark Lord, and took it down. He had read part of this the other day to reassure himself that the Light Lady Adalrico's ancestor had fallen in love with and forged the knife for really could have been none other than Calypso McGonagall. She had destroyed the Eagle Lord, and yes, a Bulstrode had fought next to him. It was no wonder that Lady McGonagall had refused to accept his suit.

It wasn't that part of the story Harry was interested in now, though. He flipped until almost the end, to a passage he had read as a child, and bent over it.

Calypso McGonagall had put her power into her voice, and it was her voice that destroyed the Eagle Lord at last. She drew her enemies into one place, one battlefield in the north of Scotland. When they were gathered into that place, all those Dark witches and wizards, she drove her voice downward, into the earth, singing.

And it answered her, with the Deepest of All Songs, and destroyed the Eagle Lord and his followers in a quake that harmed no one else.

The Lady went to walk the battlefield afterwards, with a Seer close beside her. She wished to see if anything lived in any of her wounded enemies' souls that could be salvaged.

Harry had not understood that part as a child, not seeing why Lady McGonagall would want to have a prophetess with her, but now he comprehended. This would have been a Seer like Vera, capable of telling whether someone was worth the effort to redeem.

Among the wounded and half-destroyed, they came upon Acheron Black. Now, this witch was the greatest of the Eagle Lord's followers—not the most powerful, but the most feared, his great torturer and his second-in-command. Her own power was also in her voice. She needed no whips, no Unforgivable Curses, to break someone else. She need only speak to them, and that person would be screaming before the end. She was badly hurt when they found her, but alive.

The Lady of Light looked upon her Seer, and she waited.

"She might be saved, still," said the Seer, after reading Acheron Black's soul.

Calypso McGonagall waited to hear no more. She picked up the wounded witch in her arms and took her herself from the battlefield, nursed her back to health, and kept her in her own house, striving to rekindle that elusive spark of light and kindness and humanity that the Seer had seen in the midst of all her great darkness.

It took seven years before Acheron would stop attempting to escape or kill herself, and as for what she and the Lady spoke about in their private conversations, no one will ever know. However, it is certain that the two witches joined ten years to the day after the battle against the Eagle Lord, and through the finding of a girl who became Lady Calypso's magical heir, and thus heir to the McGonagall line, their joining became a marriage.

They are the prime example of sunlight love, the love that is equal and fierce and burning always, the love of two so joined that they seem as one brilliant star. All these components are important, or it is not sunlight love. Equal: that the lovers might never know unconquerable uncertainty in each other, even in moments of weakness. Fierce: that it might never yield or stop burning. Burning: that it sheds light and heat upon all comers.

The world is richer for sunlight love, and whether it burns between two of Light or two of Dark or one of each, it is valued wherever it shines.

Harry put down the book and closed his eyes. That is the kind of love I would want to have, could I dream of such a thing as attracting someone else. That's the kind of love I would want for Draco, did he not so obviously want something different. He's deceived himself in me. There is nothing I can offer him, not like he deserves, and not if he wants moonlight love—or any other kind, for that matter.

So I have to tell him that. I know that he's going to hurt because of it, and so will I, but I can't lie to him like this. However he's convinced himself that I'm perfect for him, whatever mask of me he's seeing, he has to be unconvinced.

Harry gently put Light Lady and Dark Lord back into its place, and then strode from the library towards the Ancient Runes classroom.

Chapter Forty-Three: They Are Dancing

Draco sighed as he finished the last rune drawing. He did enjoy this class, but sometimes the tiny, endless, complicated variations on the runes made him want to scream. And they wouldn't even create some kind of amusing effect if you got them wrong, either. They just wouldn't work, and you wouldn't know it until you tried to use them.

Draco wondered why anyone would want to use them in battle, though he supposed their main use was outside battle situations. And yet there were those stories of rune-trained war witches and wizards...

He shook his head and tucked his thoughts back where they belonged, the same way he was slipping his book into his schoolbag. There was a time for thinking about class, and that was when he did homework or was actually in the classroom. Otherwise, he wanted to think about other things.

His mind returned at once to its favorite subject, of course. Harry.

Draco smiled slightly as he threaded between the desks and the other leaving students, heading for the door. He knew it was slow, that it would probably always be slow, but he and Harry were making progress. Harry had told him about Moody, and they watched the Defense professor together, though he made no more spectacular mistakes like trying to put Harry under Imperius. Harry didn't go provokingly out of his way to talk to other people just because Draco didn't like it. Harry noticed when something was wrong with him and asked about it.

Things weren't as perfect as Draco would like them to be, but they were not as stupid as they had been when Harry wouldn't talk about his mother, either.

And then, of course, Draco stepped out of the Ancient Runes classroom and found Harry leaning against the wall, waiting for him with a grave expression on his face.

“Why are you here?” Draco’s mind sprang into motion, trying to find some explanation that didn’t involve disaster for one or both of them. “Did you get hurt?”

Harry blinked, as though he thought it strange that that should be the first thing on Draco’s mind, and shook his head. “Divination was canceled,” he explained. “But I found something, and I wanted to tell you about it.”

Draco let his shoulders fall, causing his bag to slip, and him to grab for it. Harry darted forward and steadied it with one hand. Draco glanced up at him. He felt his stomach tighten when he saw the gentle look in the green eyes, as though Harry were only waiting to break bad news.

“You did get hurt,” he breathed.

Harry touched his shoulder, a motion so slight and swift that Draco barely felt it. He knew it had happened, though. He wasn’t about to deceive himself when Harry made the rare motion to touch him first. “No,” he said. “But I’m afraid that you may be about to. I need to speak with you in private, Draco.”

Still not sure what this could be about, Draco nodded slowly. “No one should be in the further corners of the library at this time of the afternoon.”

Harry sighed. “I’m afraid that won’t do. Some room really private, Draco.”

“Why?”

“You might...yell.”

Draco linked the gentle look in Harry’s eyes together with his behavior then. The idiot was about to make some other sacrifice. He would be convinced that it was for Draco’s own good, of course, whatever it was. Probably he meant to end their friendship, or to back out on sharing things with Draco.

A heat shimmer of anger made its way up his spine. "There's a classroom on the second floor that's rarely opened," he said coolly. "Let's use that one."

Harry blinked, but looked just as happy not to have to climb staircases until they reached one of the classrooms on the seventh floor. "Let's," he said, and walked beside Draco as they turned down the hall. All the while, he looked at him out of the corner of his eye. His face was downcast but determined, and now and then he chewed on his lip.

Oh, yes. It's another sacrifice.

Draco could feel his anger baking his heart until it was hard as a coal. He did care about Harry, of course he did, but even a caring friend could get tired of these fits of his. And if what Harry wanted to take away from him was something that Draco also wanted, then he was prepared to fight for it. The gentle stubbornness Harry looked ready to exert was not going to be enough this time.

If he can't be selfish, I'm perfectly capable of it.

Draco extended his emotional senses. He'd been trying to keep them to himself in the past week, learning to drop the crutch of Harry's feelings and walk among other people, sensing only what he wanted to sense. The boy he loved was still the easiest target, however. He felt the slick stone of determination, smelled the honeysuckle scent of concern for him, and saw a brief flash of pink light that usually indicated Harry was about to do something "good" that he nevertheless didn't want to do.

Draco nodded briskly. He was only confirming his guess, and he had nearly convinced himself that whatever he wanted and would fight for would be what Harry wanted and was willing to fight for, too.

I'm not about to abandon him in any sense. He'd better not ask me to. They reached the classroom, and Draco entered with a cautious look around. Moody did sometimes use this room to show physical demonstrations to his students that the ordinary room wasn't large

enough to accommodate, but now it was empty. Harry ducked in, and Draco locked the door.

He'll probably try to bolt the moment he realizes how serious I am.

Harry turned to face him, his eyes wide and his face open. Draco held firm against it. It was a beautiful, coaxing expression, and it was manipulative. Harry had frequently used it to urge Millicent and Pansy out of bad moods.

"Draco," Harry said, "I saw a new shade, blue, in that glass serpent you gave me. I went to the library to look it up, and realized that it meant romantic love. I know that you love me, now." He took a deep breath.

Draco stared at him, his own shock sweeping away the emotional sensations coming from Harry. This was not the way he had envisioned Harry finding out. He had plans for what would happen when he finally told Harry, or, as seemed more and more likely, someone in Slytherin let it slip to him. He had never thought of this.

Then he took in Harry's expression again, and felt the irritation and anger turn to rage, hard and deep.

"And you've come to tell me that you can't return that love," he interrupted. It was not the end of what he wanted to say—he could anticipate Harry's answer, in fact—but it was a necessary step in the conversation.

Harry shook his head, eyes widening even further. He could make a killing in politics if he could just use that expression to mean other things, Draco thought cynically. "It's not that, Draco. If I could afford to love someone else, then I would love you. How could I not? You're the person I feel I know best, the one person who's managed to really correct your mistakes when it comes to me, and force me to correct mine, too." A brief smile blazed across his face like a falling star, and vanished again. "You've been my friend since we came to Hogwarts, and you went through trials that would destroy any ordinary person, and you're still right here. But I know that you must have fallen in love

with some imperfect part of me, a part that you're convinced is perfect. So I came to tell you that I'm not really just that part of me. I know that you'll hurt for a while, but it would be immoral of me to keep on lying, just because I want to enjoy you love and your attention." He paused and looked at Draco attentively.

Draco was past rage, and into sheerest astonishment, not that far from amusement. Of course Harry was reacting like this. The really funny thing was that Harry thought Draco would go along with it.

He laughed.

Harry blinked, then bit his lip and looked thoughtfully at him. "Was I wrong?" he asked. "Did the blue color really mean you love someone else?"

Oh, no, he doesn't. Draco took a few steps forward and grabbed Harry's hand tightly. It must have hurt, but Harry didn't wince or pull back. He just stood there, patiently waiting for Draco to explain things to him. He would not think there was anything wrong with what he'd said, of course.

"I've gone through a lot, you said," Draco muttered to him. "Trials that would have destroyed any ordinary person."

"I did mean that." Harry narrowed his eyes, his own temper obviously stung. "I'll repeat it as often as you want me to. I don't say things I don't mean—not to you."

Draco felt a rising sweetness threaten to distract his attention from the matter at hand, but he pushed it aside. He had a lot to make clear to Harry in the next little while. "I know you meant that," he murmured, leaning closer. Harry just stared straight at him, refusing to back down or be intimidated. That was one of the things Draco loved about him, and he let that shine in his eyes even as he glared. "What you don't understand, Harry, is that I'm not in love with some imperfect part of you. I've seen what you really are, all the irritating parts included, and that's the person I love."

"You can't," said Harry. "You stand condemned out of your own mouth."

Oh, yes, just try and play lawyer, Harry. You've never been good at it. Draco raised his eyebrows in polite question.

"You came to me and had a conversation with me, just before Christmas, about perfection," said Harry, lifting his chin. "You said that you felt there was only one witch or wizard out there for every other wizard or witch. That they could be perfect for each other. We disagreed, remember? I don't believe in that kind of perfection, Draco. But if you love me, and if that's what you think you've found in me, it's an obvious mismatch between what you want and who I really am. I don't believe in your ideal of perfection, and your perfect witch or wizard would have to do so."

Draco found himself closer to the edge of anger than he would have liked. Merlin, Harry, you manage to shove me around more effectively than anyone else ever has. He caught his breath before he could blurt out something hurtful.

"I was expressing an ideal, Harry," said Draco. "That's all. I'm not surprised that you took me the wrong way. I barely knew what I was saying myself, caught as I was between trying to state what I felt for you and keep you from guessing that it was you I felt it for. But suffice it to say that I can live with someone who doesn't accept just the same beliefs that I do. Very easily. I've done it for four years, haven't I?"

"Three and a half," Harry corrected.

"I'm not going to let your pedantry ruin this," said Draco. "I'm not going to let anything ruin this." He was walking a fine line. He really would have liked to yell at Harry about being stupid, or kiss him, or do something else that would dispense with the need for all this careful talking. But Harry would find it a lot easier to ignore those things. These words would go to the heart of him. "If you tell me to go away, then yes, of course I will. But everything else is just a remnant of those idiocies you've been told." I'll keep my promise not to hurt Harry's mother. I won't even mention her. "You said you would

consider me if you could afford to love someone else. What did you mean by that? Why can't you afford to?"

Harry tugged on his arm, trying to back away. Draco wouldn't let him go. Harry hissed at him, and still Draco kept him close. He'd noticed that Harry liked to withdraw into himself when he discussed anything that touched on his training. A physical hold made it harder for that to happen, and the one thing Draco absolutely did not want to happen now was for Harry to find his own logic and start fighting back against Draco on equal ground.

Plenty of time for us both to be equal later. Not now. And if that makes me a sneaky, good-for-nothing Slytherin, so be it. I wasn't fair when Harry had just woken from that dream, either.

"You know the answer," Harry said at last, seeming to decide that he would settle for meeting Draco eye to eye if he couldn't back away. I'm not scared, his face proclaimed, while the way his hand shook betrayed otherwise. "I'm going to die in this War, Draco. It's almost certain. And if I survive, I'm not going to have any time for a lover. I'll have too much to do, for the other magical creatures and for the surviving wizards. It wouldn't be fair to you, either, to demand that you become some sort of war spouse who only waits at home for your husband to come back to you. I won't ask that of you. I would never ask it of anyone, but especially of you. You're as free as anyone else. You should have the right to choose your own life."

Pretty, Draco had to admit. I think there are a whole lot of people who would be convinced by that—either in thinking that they should choose someone else, or thinking that that meant Harry was just cold and didn't want any kind of companionship.

Too bad for them. I know him better.

"I'm never going to wait at home, Harry," he said. "I am going into the battles right alongside you so that I can fight at your side, and the politics so that I can plot with you, and whatever other arena you enter. I love you. I love everything that's in you. Nothing about you is strange to me, and no part of your life is going to be strange to me, either. I know that we're never going to be identical, and I've seen

that since I summoned Julia Malfoy, but we can be equal.” He paused for a moment, then shrugged. I’ve said other things that could sound stupid if Harry took them that way. I might as well say this. “I want sunlight love with you, if you’re familiar with that term.”

Harry’s face washed of color. Then he said, “But you want moonlight love.”

Draco blinked at him. He thought he’d done well so far, but he just couldn’t keep up with Harry, the way he rushed up to the edge of a cliff made of logic, jumped off it, and landed on the far side of a different ravine altogether. “Why do you think so?”

“All that nattering about perfection.” Harry had his eyes narrowed, as though he were examining a fly someone had dropped in his glass of pumpkin juice. Draco felt a surge of hope. You had everything planned out, didn’t you, Harry? And then I rearranged it. “It’s moonlight love that’s called perfect. Sunlight love burns people, sometimes. It’s too fierce. If you want someone perfect, then you want love like the moon.”

“No,” said Draco slowly. He could understand the confusion, but he didn’t understand the pallor of Harry’s face when he spoke of it. “I’m quite sure. I want love like the sun. I think everyone does, of course, unless they’re mad and want the darkness, but most people have to settle for what they get. I’m not settling. I’ve got you, until the moment when you utterly tell me to go away.” He clasped Harry’s other hand while he was distracted.

“This isn’t—” said Harry, and then stopped. He tugged against Draco’s grip. Draco ignored the motion. Harry looked away from him for the first time, staring down at his own hands. “You want sunlight love,” he said, his voice suddenly clipped. “That’s fine. That’s perfect. I hope you find it. But you’re not going to find it with me.”

Draco gritted his teeth. He felt sick to his stomach, but he also remembered all the idiocies that Harry believed about himself. This was probably directly traceable to another of those idiocies. “Why is that? Do you not want it yourself?”

"I want it myself," Harry said. "But it's a stupid dream. A child's dream, like you said. Most people have to settle for what they get. And I've got something else. I've got a duty that won't go away, and if I let myself start thinking that I'll get a spouse or a lover, it'll disrupt things. I was made to help other people, Draco. I stay in the background, and I make them happier. That's what I'm supposed to do." This time, he pulled violently enough that Draco was forced to loose his left hand.

It was still going much more positively than Draco had expected it to go at this point, though. For one thing, Harry could have used his magic at any time to break free, or pin Draco to the wall, or make him shut up, and it hadn't even occurred to him. He was vibrating with distress, but he hadn't called his power.

For another, Draco knew the enemy, now, and he could attack it with every weapon at his command.

"That's stupid, Harry," he said, keeping his voice low and compelling. "Why should everyone else have a lover, and you don't get one? What's the big exception about you?" He cocked his head. "You're the one who's said before that other people are far better than you are, that you weren't anything special." That statement had always made Draco want to laugh himself sick, but he knew it was what Harry himself believed.

"That's the thing about me," Harry said. He was trying to put the shattered pieces of his mask back in place, and failing. "They're better than I am, Draco. Everyone is wonderful. You deserve someone who can make you happy, who can love you the way you want. And I'm not going to be that person."

"It's not that you're not that person by nature, Harry," said Draco. "It's not even that you don't want to be that person. What is it?"

"It isn't—" Harry swallowed. "There's not—" He stopped, looking utterly lost.

Draco understood. Harry saw where this road led as clearly as he did. If Harry admitted that one fundamental truth like this about himself was a lie, he would have to admit others were. The house of cards

would start coming down, even if it took years for it to fall completely. Harry wouldn't be able to hide any more behind stupid, illogical assurances like everyone else being a better person than he was. He would have to give in and admit that he was just fine in some ways, and good in others, and engage with people as a wizard and not some distant, aloof benefactor.

It was frightening, Draco supposed, and that was why Harry was currently fighting the realization with all his might. And the method he chose would have worked, with someone else who knew him less well than Draco did.

"I've done horrible things, Draco. You know that. I summoned Dark magic. I haven't cared enough. I've made so many mistakes. I knocked you out and left you behind last year when you wanted to go with me. I valued Connor over you until the end of last year, and I know that always irritated you." Harry turned wide eyes on him once again. "Don't you see? Those are parts of the kind of person I am, too."

"I know that," said Draco. He was feeling calm, past the initial surge of emotions that had fastened him to Harry's side in the first place. "And what you don't seem to understand, Harry, is that I forgive you for those. Your own credo. I know you hate its being used against you, but there you go. Sometimes we can't choose what our friends do. Or our lovers, for that matter."

"Don't you understand?" Harry wrenched backwards. Draco let go of his right wrist and took his left one. "This could happen again."

"Then I'll get angry," said Draco. "And then I'll forgive you, and then we'll be back here again. Unless you tell me to leave you alone, Harry, that you don't want to love me in that particular way. I'll leave you alone, then. But you have to tell me first. Your attempts to frighten me away don't frighten me in the least."

Harry glared at him helplessly. Draco rearranged his face in his best helpful expression.

"Damn you, this isn't funny," Harry hissed at him.

"I know," said Draco. "I never said it was."

"It's—you can't love me like that," said Harry.

"Why?" Draco asked. "Is this your telling me to go away?" He braced himself. He would hate it, it would hurt, but he honestly felt as though he would have jumped off a cliff at that moment if Harry told him to.

"No," said Harry. "It's impossible like you flying without magic is impossible. You can't. If you could really see my soul, then you wouldn't love me. You're still seeing a bit of me, and convincing yourself that I can be good based on that. But that part isn't me, Draco." He looked a bit calmer now that he was twisting logic back into tortured shapes, Draco thought. "I'm not what you think I am."

"How do you know that?" Draco asked. "You're not in my head, sharing my judgment."

"Because I know myself," said Harry, and smiled slightly. "And if you love me, then you must not know the truth. One implies the other." He looked half-relaxed.

"You've looked into my mind, and seen what I feel." Draco could keep himself going in the face of this. He could. Breaking down into a tantrum would feel good, but it would not help, and Draco was past the point when he flew into anger or tears just because it felt good. "Can you think me mistaken, after that, Harry?"

"You could believe that I really am as you see me. That doesn't mean it's the truth."

Fight poison with poison, then. "And how do you know that your own view of yourself is correct? Unless you're suddenly manifesting magical talents that you haven't bothered to share with me, you can't see your own soul, either."

Harry's smile withered. Draco lifted his head. I thought so. He isn't back in his secure view of himself, yet. I can still take his wobbly tower down with a statement as simple as this one.

“Because I know,” said Harry, his voice growing tight. “Because I’ve been told that all my life—” He stopped.

Draco rubbed his hand gently, making the motion a contrast to his harsh words. “Because your mother told you, isn’t that right, Harry? Your mother whom you know lied to you and abused you?”

“Stop it.” Harry lunged around him for the first time, heading for the door. Draco spun, but kept his feet anchored, holding Harry still.

“No,” he said. “I won’t. I promised that I wouldn’t hurt her or insult her, but I never said I wouldn’t speak the truth, Harry. And I certainly never promised that I wouldn’t insult you. The truth is that you’re being a coward. You’re so scared of what it means if you’re better than you think you are that you want to run away from me.”

Harry turned back around. A soundless scream was issuing from his mouth, and he panted with tears in his eyes. He shook his head madly as he backed up from Draco. “No,” he whispered. “This isn’t—it can’t be what you want it to be. Because it isn’t. And I know it doesn’t make sense, and I know that you’ll say that, and I don’t care, because that’s the way it is.”

Draco took a deep breath. He wanted badly to let Harry go, let him regroup. They would have the rest of their lives to work these things out. On the other hand, let him go now, and he didn’t know if he would get this far again. Harry was going to build his walls high and strong, and come up with more logical arguments to distract Draco’s attention from the illogicalities sitting right in the middle of him. And in another mood, Draco didn’t think he could be as generous and forgiving as he was right now.

Or maybe you’re just scared of living with Harry when he knows that you love him.

Draco acknowledged that, and put the thought away, because it wasn’t useful right now.

“Listen, Harry,” he whispered. “Is there anyone whose judgment you would trust to be unbiased, someone who could see your soul and tell you the truth about it?”

“The Seer,” Harry muttered. “Vera. The one you met the night you summoned Julia. But she’s back in her Sanctuary now. There’s no one near me whose judgment I would—”

Abruptly, he froze. Then he said, “You wouldn’t really make me go to them, Draco, would you?”

“Go to whom?” Yes, I will. I’m sorry, Harry, but even if you don’t choose me after all, I want you to have this. Vera might have made you look at your soul, but then she went away again. This has to be a gaze you can’t back away from.

“The unicorns,” Harry breathed. “They can recognize innocence. They can recognize goodness. I think I know how to break their web now.” He turned those wide, appealing eyes on Draco one final time. “But that wouldn’t be right, would it? Because I would have a selfish purpose in breaking the web, and that wouldn’t be in accord with what a true vates should do. So we could wait—”

“And then you would have an even more selfish purpose in waiting,” Draco cut in. “Besides, Harry, you told me that a true vates is supposed to know himself inside and out, and shouldn’t that include whatever truth the unicorns can tell you?”

Harry closed his eyes. His expression was of someone who knows that he can’t stop the boulder already falling.

“All right,” he whispered. “Yes. I—we’ll go to them.”

Draco nodded. “Right now.”

Harry opened his mouth, but obviously saw it would do no good. He gave a tiny nod.

Harry was shaking as he walked along the path into the Forbidden Forest, ducking beneath branches slick and starred with ice-flowers. It wasn’t from the cold, nor yet from the tight grip that Draco had on

his wrist, the grip he hadn't once released, though that felt too good. It wasn't even from the thought of facing the unicorns.

It was from the thought of facing what came after the unicorns were free, of not being able to hide any more.

A hoof sounded off to the side. Harry knew it was the centaurs watching them, and kept his eyes focused dead ahead.

One way or another, he was going to have to go forward from this. This was a crossroads, and someone had shut the gates behind him.

Harry darted a glance at Draco. No, not some mysterious someone. I know his name perfectly well.

A glimpse of white showed through the trees to one side—a falling snowflake.

He was not going to be able to change what happened.

A convulsive shiver gripped him, and Harry held himself with his free arm.

Bells rang through the Forest.

Startled, Harry jerked to a stop, and felt oddly naked for a moment. The last time he'd been in the Forest, the Many snake had ridden his arm, and he'd been able to use that to distract Tybalt and John. Since December, however, the Many snakes had been all together in their den, tending the eggs about to hatch, and Harry had nothing but his own magic and the courage of his convictions, which felt like very far from being enough.

The bells rang again, and a unicorn stallion walked onto the path.

Harry watched him come, his coat catching the quick winter light in mirror-colored shimmers. His golden hooves rose and fell in odd motions that didn't seem to echo the chiming sound of them. His head bobbed, his neck rolled, and his ears twitched in motions that

mimicked a deer's more than a horse's, but all of the motions only seemed to rush into light that rippled towards that silver horn.

Unicorns are creatures of clear sight—honesty, Light. He knows what I've come for.

Harry put out one hand. The unicorn came to him, but halted just shy of a touch, his head lowered and his horn pointed towards Harry's left shoulder.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he could see the blazing web that crawled over the unicorn and crept into the Forest to encircle the others. He knew, from hints he'd read in the books during his research on unicorns, that Dobby had been right in what he said about that web. Ancient wizards had bound the unicorns because they were too beautiful.

But they had also bound them because they were beautiful. They wanted unicorns always nearby to look at. They could not bear the thought of them dispersing, the way they would, naturally, and living one or two at a time, apart from each other, in places that they would hallow. They could not bear the thought of going a lifetime without seeing one, or only catching a glimpse of a white shape darting through a clearing, and a distant, muffled sound of bells.

But that distant, hurried glimpse by sunlight or moonlight was what should have happened, and what the unicorns wanted to happen, and it was what Harry was finally ready to give them.

He forced himself to ignore his own motivation, and Draco standing motionless, rigid with wonder, at his side. He reached out, and dipped under the web, and found the weak spot in the center of it.

Wizards were complacent now, knowing exactly where unicorns lived and what had to be done to keep them that way. They might come and stare a few times in their lives, but then they would go away again. Those ancient wizards had been desperate for a glimpse of beauty, and their desire had kept the web strong. As desire faded, the strands in the center of the net were also unraveling.

Harry now had to conquer, mainly, his own desire to keep that beauty snared and near.

And it was harder than he had expected. He pictured never seeing a unicorn again in his life, and though he had seen them only a few times, and once had been to watch Quirrell kill one, he struggled. It was like being asked to yield one of the colors he had always known. What would his world be like if he could suddenly no longer see silver, or white, or gold? The others would still be there, but they could not take the place of the one he had lost.

The unicorn stallion made no motion to help him one way or the other. He stood watching, waiting. A subtle shine permeated his coat.

Harry closed his eyes more tightly, and found the answer in his own habit of sacrifice and what the unicorns would want. He could give up this one thing he liked. He had given up things that meant more.

And the unicorns...

Harry pictured them as free, which they would be when he was done with them, and then he was crying, tears streaking his face, and then he reached out and took hold of the web, and it parted like dead skin in his hands. Someone had finally, finally, wanted the unicorns to feel pleasure more than he wanted to feel it himself, and that had been all it took. Harry mourned, that the unicorns had been enslaved for so long for so simple a reason.

Then the mourning vanished.

Harry opened his eyes.

And, for the first time, he looked straight into the heart of Light, and he understood, in that flash, why his mother and Dumbledore both loved it so much.

The unicorn shone against his surroundings, beauty of the kind that was higher and brighter and richer than what was around him, beauty that did not make the bracken and the withered leaves and the ice

seem worthless, but transfigured it and lent back his own light to glorify it the more. For the first time, Harry knew what color joy had.

Then his own skin began to blaze.

Startled, Harry looked down at himself. His skin had turned transparent, and he could see a deep, clear green light welling from his arms and his wrists. It spread, pulsing, down his body, and then acquired a tinge of gold. Gold-green, the color of leaves in sunlight, the colors that Harry knew meant, together, a soul on the edge of both darkness and light, but also one that was entering into the summer of its being, and had a summer to offer others.

That hid inside him. If it was not the color of his soul, it was, at the very least, a color of who he was.

The realization chopped the legs out from under him. Harry sank into the snow of the path, and the green-golden light came with him, beaming, growing brighter now, soaring out of him, bringing a radiance to the Forest that made it look as if it were bathed in a burning spring. Harry felt Draco kneel down beside him and embrace him. He tried to speak, but he couldn't. His throat was tight with sorrow and elation keen enough to kill him. He couldn't hear what Draco was saying; the world was one madly thrumming mess, thanks to his heart going in his ears.

That could not cover the sound of his thoughts, though, and they repeated one thing over and over. My mother was wrong. Oh, she was wrong.

And out of the trees came the other unicorns, their legs bending like reeds, their necks bobbing like swans courting, every step light enough to be a dance. They gathered, and then they began to gallop, an enormous, turning circle around Harry and Draco, each one blazing like a stained-glass window with the sun shining through it, gratified and fulfilled and exalted.

Harry felt the lump in his throat dissolve, and he cried again, hard as he tried to resist the tears. The barriers were broken, and he had come out of the autumn and winter into summer and spring.

The circle began to blur, gaining speed. The unicorns trailed clouds of glory now, streaks of blue and red and gold and green as well as the more usual white and silver. The path and the Forest filled with the radiance of a hundred thousand dawns, rising straight up into the sky, like an aurora.

With the light went the unicorns, whirling ascending, not distinct shapes but winds of light now, the smaller shapes the foals, the larger shapes the mares and stallions, rippling through an endless spectrum of shades.

But Light. Always, Light.

They reached a point about a hundred feet into the air, and then they trembled. For a moment, the whole vision froze. Harry could hear Draco gasping beside him. He looked up, to remember this. For sure, he would never see anything like it again. The unicorns were free now.

There came a moment when he wished it could be permanent, and then he discarded that, because change was the law of life.

Then the image resounded with one musical cry, and broke apart. Burning streaks raced away towards all the edges of the horizon. The unicorns were scattering through the world now, Harry thought, and Muggles might glimpse them speeding along the streets of their cities or grazing in a back garden as easily as the wizards would see them in wild forests or galloping along the edge of the sea. Unicorns went where they pleased, and now, for the first time in centuries, they could do it again.

The silence and the dimness that fell seemed very foreign, after that, or would have, were it not for the aftertastes of light still lingering on the bracken and the ice, the leaves and the path.

Harry's green-golden shine gently faded, though some motes flashed, lingering like last notes of music. Harry could hear his own gasping now, too. He closed his eyes tightly and strove for some sense of self-control.

“You know,” he whispered, “that it might be a long road to walk before I can love you just the way you love me.”

“I know,” Draco whispered. His voice was hoarse. “But are you going to refuse to walk that road, now?”

Harry shook his head, and then found the courage to turn, open his eyes, and look at Draco.

Draco was smiling at him. There was summer in his eyes.

Intermission: Glances

Millicent glanced up from her book as the door to the Slytherin common room opened and Harry and Draco came through. She could barely see Harry's face at first; Draco was bending over him and saying something in a low, excited tone that instantly made her want to listen more closely. People always give away their best secrets when they're talking like that.

Harry came into view at last, and Millicent paused. She had thought of sneaking up to them so that she could hear at least a few words of Draco's conversation—he was too deep in speech to notice her, and Harry too deep in listening—but now she gave it up.

Something happened. At last. Draco told him? No, the shaken look in Harry's eyes is too deep for that. He looks like he's been picked up and dunked underwater twenty times.

But there was a definite difference between them now, and Millicent wound up watching in silence as they climbed the stairs, her eyes narrowed in thought.

Draco did tell him, I think. He had to have. That's the only thing that would start that shaking in Harry. But it was combined with something else, and they probably aren't inclined to tell me what it was.

Start from what you know, then. Draco told Harry. And Harry didn't run in the other direction, or Draco would have come back to the common room alone and with his magic blasting the furniture apart in his rage.

This will give the Malfoys an advantage with Harry. I don't know if Harry would actually join with Draco, but Draco isn't one to let a door shut if it's even a little way open.

Millicent stood, thoughtfully, and went to write a letter to her father. She was no longer reporting to him on Harry's daily movements, but this was something larger, something that could affect their political standing in what Adalrico was calling Potter's Alliance for want of a

better name. Her father would want to know what had happened, especially since Millicent knew that he had a private bet with Lucius Malfoy about its likelihood. He would appreciate having a few days or weeks to adjust his mood to losing before Mr. Malfoy came to gloat to him about having won the bet.

Pansy maintained a properly solemn expression as Harry and Draco passed her, pretending that her Transfiguration homework was the most interesting thing in the world. Then she threw back her head and laughed so hard that Montague, trying to do his homework in a nearby chair, glared at her and stormed off.

It's about time! Honestly, I might have made a move on Harry myself if Draco had waited any longer. Since when is any Malfoy that patient, or that pigheaded?

Pansy rolled back over and put her head on her arm, smiling. She watched Millicent go up to their room, doubtless to write a letter. She took that kind of thing seriously. She had never been more her father's magical heir than this month, when her mother was due to deliver a child who might or might not share Millicent's position in the family someday.

Pansy had no letters to write, at least right now. She was only her mother's blood heir, and had no need to let her know of Harry and Draco's obvious attachment to each other until it became more obvious.

Let them enjoy their privacy, Pansy thought as she picked her book up again, her cheeks hurting from the pressure of her grin. They'll have little of it soon enough. Draco ought to realize that dating the Hero of Hogwarts will make him rather more interesting than he's been so far. Watch him get indignant about it, though, and storm and fume and complain that the press no longer trembles before the word of a Malfoy.

At that she couldn't help herself, and started laughing again. Albus blinked slowly, roused from a daze he couldn't remember entering. He was often like that, when he had lost his consciousness to the wards. He was so busy seeing and hearing around the school,

and sorting information into his merely human mind, that he it took him some time to realize the import of what he had seen.

Now he did.

His face grave, he paced over to his window and cast the spell that would let him see the Forbidden Forest. It lay calm and dull under the heavy February snow, looking as it always had—until Albus raised his magic and looked at it through the eyes of a man who once might have been vates, and could see webs.

The unicorns' web was gone, and with it, a large part of the beauty and color of the Forest.

Albus closed his eyes and sighed wearily. He wondered if Harry knew what he had done, realized how endangered the unicorns would be in the wider world, from Muggle hunters and wizards intent on getting their hands on horns. He wondered if Harry even realized that a small part of the everyday joy at Hogwarts came from the happiness that the unicorns breathed as they existed in the Forest, that it dispersed across the grounds and added cheer to the students' moods.

Of course, he would probably only shrug and say that he values the unicorns' freedom more.

Albus shook his head. The boy was too careless, too impatient and hasty. He could not be trusted the way that Albus, as a Light Lord, should have been able to trust another powerful wizard to realize what was sensible and not make waves in the world. But Harry was not sensible, and never had been, or they wouldn't have had to bind his magic.

Albus turned thoughtfully back to his desk. He would keep his promise, and not interfere further with Harry in the school. But he thought there was something else he could do, bread he could cast on the water and see if it came back to him. There was no harm in writing. The one he had chosen would probably reject his letters, anyway, as he'd had a habit of doing of late.

But he could try. Much of his life, lately, seemed to consist of long and patient trying, regardless of whether or not he could see immediate results.

Snape glanced up from the law book he was studying. It was nearly time for double Potions with the Slytherins and Gryffindors, and he wondered, mind still half-caught up in what he was reading, what Harry would look like this morning. His face had been pale and shaken last night, but he had eluded Snape's every attempt to confront him, and simply gone to bed.

Harry and Draco came in first, most unusually, and were so caught up in talking that they didn't even realize he was there. Snape watched them take their seats and continue chatting.

No. Not caught up in talking. Caught up in each other.

Snape released his breath on a long hiss, surprised. Harry glanced sharply at him, then, but turned his shoulder a moment later when Draco said something in a coaxing tone. Then he laughed, and his face acquired a rare, vivid openness that Snape had seen only during this past August, when Harry had been so close to peace.

He told him. And it was not a disaster.

Snape stared at them blankly, trying to conceive how that could be. Harry, from what he knew of his relationship with Draco lately, should not have taken this so calmly. He might have accepted Draco's friendship and confidences, but it was a long step from there to being lovers, or even boyfriends. And there was the fleeting nature of Draco's crush, which should surely have died a swift death. Crushes did, when one was Draco's age and of Draco's disposition. He might be possessive, but he was also temperamental. Snape had assumed he would tire of not having Harry and move on to someone else, resuming his place as Harry's friend easily enough.

Of course, he had always been different about Harry.

Snape nearly decided that he would retain his doubts until he saw something definitive to crush them, but then stopped that train of thought. Why could he not allow himself—that was the word hovering

on the edges of his consciousness—to believe that Draco’s crush would last? Was he really preparing himself to comfort a broken-hearted Harry?

Yet he should not have his heart broken at all. It should have taken far more for him to even consent to the idea, if I know him. There would be a great deal of nonsense about not being worthy of Draco’s loving him, and how he was sure that no one could love him in that way, and how he does not have a future. And Draco does not have the patience to deal with that.

Yet it had apparently happened. And there was no rupture between the boys, but no simple friendship, either, not with the way that Harry was obviously paying attention to Draco’s hand on his shoulder, gazing at it as if he knew why it was there but were trying to assimilate the reason. He would either have tolerated the touch without notice or swatted it off before.

Snape decided that he could wait and see what happened. There were far worse courses.

And now, he thought, his gaze briefly darting to the drawer where he had locked the bottle of Pensieve Potion, while his mind spasmed in wonder and doubt, I almost think I should wait on my plan. Speak to Harry, first, before I do anything rash. Perhaps I should have Draco with me when I do, if he can soothe Harry so effectively.

“Lucius!”

Lucius glanced up lazily from the book he was reading. He had only meant to look up the color of Potter’s soul when he got it down from the library shelf, but the theory of colors was more interesting than he remembered, and he’d ended up reading a great deal more. Deep green had meant just what he thought it did, both in strength of power and potential and in darkness of the soul. Lucius had been pleased. Either color meant good things for his family, as long as things fell out in the way Narcissa said they would.

And now she was entering the room, waving a letter covered with handwriting that looked like Draco’s, her face full of proud elation.

Lucius smiled and sat upright, reaching out to catch and kiss her free hand. "Let me guess, my dear," he said. "Our son is now absolutely sure that Harry will be our son-in-law someday."

His wife blinked at him, an inch from gaping. Lucius allowed himself a small—a very small—smirk. It was rare enough to get the drop on Narcissa that he had no compunctions about doing so, especially when it made her act like that.

She stood straight at once, of course, her eyes narrowing. "You intercepted the owl and read the letter before I did," she accused him.

Lucius turned a page in his book. "No."

"Draco wrote you another letter, in which he confided his hopes and fears, so that you knew what the next message would say."

Lucius glanced up, admiring the defiant flash of his wife's blue eyes. "No."

"Then tell me how."

"No," said Lucius a third time, and stood himself, drawing Narcissa near and kissing her on the mouth to silence her. "Does it matter, my dear?" he breathed as he drew back. "We will be Harry's favored allies; we cannot help but be, as long as he returns Draco's love, do they join in five years or in ten. The position of our family is secure for at least this generation, and the next as well, as long as Harry and Draco find a child to be a magical heir. Imagine the power of one who inherits the magic of a Lord. You were the one who saw the potential in Harry first. You were the one who told me. Can you doubt that the world will change when Harry Potter is done with it?"

"He will not be a Lord," said Narcissa, but she had the half-comfortable, half-speculative look on her face that meant she was thinking about what he had said, and fitting it neatly into the world of her own plans. Or she was thinking about the kiss, Lucius conceded, as she threaded her fingers through his hair.

“No,” said Lucius, though privately, he had his doubts about that. Potter had noble ideals, of course, but every other wizard who had tried to walk that road had ended up on one side or the other. So long as the boy chose Dark when he did stumble—and Lucius could not help but think he would, what with his swearing not to be a Light Lord—then there was nothing wrong with his middle road. It might even increase his prestige in the public’s eye. They would think him all the more benevolent.

“But he will be Draco’s, or so he thinks,” said Narcissa, and put the letter on the table beside his chair. “You will read it later?” She started pulling him towards the stairs.

Lucius smiled at her, the slow smile he knew she liked best. “Of course,” he agreed, and let thoughts of politics go for now. Marrying Narcissa had been good politics, but that was not the reason he was filled with fierce delight whenever she wanted to go to bed. That was all, and only, her.

Chapter Forty-Four: A Moment Between Brothers

Harry sighed and shifted back until he sat on the edge of the single long table that was the only furniture in this particular abandoned classroom; apparently Professor Flitwick's third-year Charms class had managed to disintegrate most of their desks, and he'd had to appropriate furniture from the upstairs classrooms. It wasn't one of their usual meeting places, and for that reason, Harry knew that Connor was more likely to come alone.

Good.

He had things he had to speak to Connor about, and Connor had had the same idea, from the note that Godric had delivered to Harry during breakfast this morning. A private place would be best for both.

The door opened, and Connor entered. Harry could feel the old relaxation of soul that he had had around his brother since he was a small child. He was most comfortable with Connor, for all that he could feel different things for other people now. He had to step carefully with Snape, Slytherin was sometimes a mass of reaction and counter-reaction and watching, and Draco...

Draco kept frightening Harry. He was too sharp-edged, too prone to know when Harry was doubting his ability to continue along their path and slide in to reassure him. Harry hadn't been able to hide from him at all since the freeing of the unicorns nearly a week ago.

In some moments, he felt an almost giddy rejoicing about that. The rest of the time, he was terrified.

But with Connor, he only needed to think about that insofar as he had to tell him about Draco. He grinned and held out his arms, and Connor came to him, hugged him hard, and then stepped back and drew something large out of his pocket. Harry raised his eyebrows. It was the golden egg Connor had managed to acquire from the Hungarian Horntail in the First Task.

"This is the clue to the Second Task," said Connor bluntly. "I have no clue what to do with it."

Harry blinked. "Connor, the Second Task's only two days away."

Connor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I know. And yeah, it was stupid of me to wait this long to come to you. But I really thought I could figure it out on my own." He paused, then added softly, "And I don't like thinking about the Tournament, you know? I didn't choose this, and even with your distracting the attention from me, everyone still expects me to be Hogwarts's Champion somehow."

Harry felt a stab of guilt. He had never asked how Connor felt about his sudden presence in the First Task. He had taken the opportunity to let it slide into silence when Connor never brought it up. He had enough other things to think about that he would take quiet when it was offered.

"Do you—do you resent what I did?" he asked.

Connor stood there for some seconds, studying his trainers. Then he looked up. "Do you want the brotherly answer or the real answer?" he asked.

Harry grinned despite himself. "The brotherly answer is the one that parents would approve of, right?"

"Right. I tell you how thrilled and proud I am that you're finally getting some attention, that of course you were right to defend everybody and without you tons of people would have died, and so on." Connor waved a hand.

"Assume that's a given," said Harry. "And the real answer?"

"I was kind of jealous, yeah." Connor shifted. "I mean, Harry, it's wonderful that you finally are getting attention. But I was used to it for so long." He shrugged and tried a self-deprecating laugh that didn't come out well. "I suppose I'm not quite as resigned to being in the shadows as I thought I was. I have no idea how you stood it for so long," he added.

Harry shrugged in turn. "I was used to it. Believe me, I would transfer all the fame and glory to you in a heartbeat. I have no idea how you stand that."

Connor shook his head. "All right. So we've established that we'd like each other's respective amounts of attention, and yeah, I'm jealous, and on we go. Can you help me with this?" He reached out and flipped open the top of the golden egg.

Harry jumped as an enormous screeching sound issued from the egg, then blinked. "That's Mermish," he said, after listening to it for a moment.

Connor's mouth dropped open. "How the fuck do you know that?" he blurted. "Hermione wouldn't have known that."

"Did you ask her?" Harry was trying to make out individual words, but he knew very little of the language—how to count to ten and a few greetings, really. It was definitely Mermish, though. Nothing sounded similar.

"Well, um, no."

"There you go, then." Harry reached out and shut the top of the egg. He could just make out that the words were repeating, but that didn't help with knowing them. "It sounds like ordinary speech underwater. Take it to the Lake or a bathtub or a pool, and listen to it there."

Connor abruptly swallowed. "You think we'll have to go underwater for the Second Task?"

Harry softened. "I forgot, Connor," he said. "I'm sure it'll be fine. I can teach you a charm that'll let you see and hear and breathe down there."

"That has nothing to do with water being over my head, though." Connor's voice had risen a notch.

Harry settled for walking over to his brother and patting him on the shoulder. "I'm sure it'll be fine," was all he could say.

Connor nodded, shakily.

He'd nearly drowned in the tub when they were three. Lily had left Harry to watch him while she went to fetch their clothes, but Harry hadn't realized the tub was full of water already, and had been thinking about practicing spells. Connor had climbed up on the side to look in, slipped, and fallen. Harry had run to his side the moment he heard the splashing and gurgling, but he knew it was his duty to get his brother out of trouble, and Connor couldn't shriek for help, and Harry wasn't strong enough to lift him out. His magic had come into play at last, snatching Connor awkwardly from the water and holding his head out so he could breathe. Since then, his brother been all right around water he could stand or sit in, like a shower or a shallow pool or the ocean along the beach near Lux Aeterna, but he'd panicked whenever the water went over his head, and he was not a strong swimmer.

"Can you teach me a warming charm, too?" Connor whispered. "The lake will be cold, I think."

"Of course," said Harry quietly, focusing on standing as still as possible so that Connor wouldn't panic further. He was thinking of giving up on what he'd come here to tell his brother. Surely Connor needed help with the Second Task far more than he needed to hear Harry's secrets.

"What did you want to tell me?"

Damn. He'd remembered the note Harry had sent Hedwig with, requesting a meeting, just before the note from Connor arrived at the Slytherin table. He took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of the table again. "Well, one is that—" He paused. How did he describe what he and Draco had, or didn't have, right now in words?

"Um," he said, and then decided to go for honesty and be damned. Connor was a Gryffindor. He'd get it. "Draco loves me."

Connor stared at him.

“And I—” Harry looked away. “I don’t know what my own feelings are.” Merlin, I sound like some sort of eleven-year-old crying over her dead kitten. He hated being honest, because most of the time it sounded stupid. He was amazed that Draco hadn’t got tired of it yet and let things slip back into their comfortable silence. He was gradually coming to realize that that wouldn’t happen again, though, or at least not for long stretches, and that was another thing to terrify himself with. “But he proved a point to me the other day about my wanting to run away from what he wants, and I know I’ll love him someday. Right now, I have no idea about it. I want to hide under the bed.” He flushed, since he’d not meant to admit that last part out loud.

Connor was silent for a moment. Harry looked back at him, almost glad to find a new source of anxiety in wondering what Connor would say about his dating Draco. At least it would not be as deeply painful as this attempt to live like a normal person, to remember, whenever he was tempted to slide back into his old patterns of thought, that Lily was wrong.

At last, Connor said, “Well, he’d be mad not to love you, Harry, honestly.”

Harry stared at him, and then said, because he had to get away from the seriousness somehow, “Is this the part where you confess the weird incestuous crush you’ve nursed on me for years?”

“No,” said Connor, as though talking to a small child, though he flushed a deep red first. “No. I—well, damn, Harry, I’ve seen the way he hangs all over you. I didn’t think it was a crush. I thought it was just hero-worship. But after the last year, I think he would be mad not to love you, if he can.” Connor shrugged. “So there. Was that the big secret you were shaking to confess to me?”

“One more,” said Harry, and then he closed his eyes, and he gave Connor the prepared speech he’d recited in his head about Christmas night.

He didn’t look at his brother during the recitation, and Connor didn’t interrupt. Harry found himself glad that he’d practiced the words. It drained them of most of the emotion. He could just drown himself in

the patterns of light exploding behind his eyelids. They were the important things, not how he felt like he was drawing and quartering himself by telling Connor what their mother had done to him.

I hate this honesty thing, he fretted to himself. Why does it have to hurt so much?

But Connor deserved to know the truth, and it would be doubly selfish to hold something like this back from his brother—selfish in motive, and selfish because he needed it. Harry finished the recitation and bowed his head.

Connor was still quiet. Harry sneaked a look at him out of the corner of his eye, but it wasn't helpful, because he was looking at his twin's trainers and not his face, and trainers were not notoriously good reflectors of expression.

Then Connor spoke, in a simple, hard voice that Harry had never heard from him before. "I'm never going back to them."

Harry blinked. "I don't think James had anything to do with this," he ventured. He didn't think so. He'd been exchanging letters with his father for a few months now, and James was still self-aggrandizing and badgering Harry about Snape, but he had calmed down and started to ask actual questions. And Harry knew Connor had been writing letters to him all along. "You don't have to cut him out of your life."

"I want to."

Connor's face had melted into a mulishly stubborn expression that Harry was all too familiar with. He shook his head, though. "Why?"

Connor looked at him as if he were mad, then ran his hands through his hair and started pacing. Harry decided it wouldn't be politic to comment on how much he looked like James at the moment.

"All of this happened right in the same house where I was living," said Connor. "And I never noticed. I was stupid. I'm tired of being stupid, Harry. I was stupid about Tom Riddle possessing me, and I was

stupid about Sirius, and I was stupid when I was a kid. I don't want to be stupid again. Living with Dad would make me stupid, I think. He never noticed, or he pretended not to notice, and maybe he could make me do the same thing."

"And Mum?" Harry asked quietly.

"You don't have to call her that just to placate me, you know."

Harry winced, and kept still. Connor would be perceptive at the oddest times.

"She—she did all that to you." Connor waved one hand, as much to say that he didn't have to speak of it. "She didn't have to. But she was willing to, from what you told me. I don't want to live in a house with someone like that, either. Unless you really think that there's a chance she'll change her mind."

Harry shook his head, and forced down the stupid, stupid tears. Talking about Lily was still hard for him, and harder since Draco wouldn't let him hide it any more. It had been simpler when Harry could just wall him out.

"All right," said Connor, and exhaled. "So I'm not going back to either one of them. And I'm going to try to make an effort to get along with Malfoy, as long as he makes an effort to get along with me. And I'll go into the Lake on Saturday." He glanced at Harry, and made an effort at a smile. It was rather ghastly. "I hope that last 'go' works out well."

Harry hugged him again, because he could, and then drew his wand. "I'll teach you those charms now, if you like."

"Good," said Connor, and managed to ignore the thought of impending lake water over his head for the next half hour, if the way he performed the spells was any indication. Harry watched him all the while, his dark hair falling into his hazel eyes, and his face reflecting his stubbornness and his determination.

I have a better brother than I could have imagined.

"Mr. Potter? Please come with me."

Harry nodded reassuringly to Draco, and slipped away from the Slytherin bench to follow McGonagall. He had noticed that Professor Dumbledore wasn't at the head table, and wondered if the Head of Gryffindor was taking Harry to see him. He hoped not. They had avoided each other quite companionably for the last two months. Harry didn't see why it should change now.

McGonagall led him into the side room where the Champions had gone after their choosing by the Goblet, though, and turned to face him. Harry shut the door behind him, and looked at her in question.

"A requirement of the Second Task," said McGonagall quietly, "is that each Champion dive under the lake to rescue the person he or she misses most. You are Connor's twin brother, Harry, and he would miss you the most. Each person must be put under a sleep spell to stay calm under the lake. I assure you that you'll be able to breathe, and you'll stay protected until your head is above the surface again. However, while the Headmaster will perform the sleep spell on Krum's and Delacour's most prized people, I know that you would not trust him to perform it on you. Will you trust me?"

Harry blinked. So that's the challenge. At least Dumbledore's being sincere about his promise not to interfere with me in any way.

"Is the charm strong enough, Professor McGonagall?" he asked. "It might just wear off me otherwise."

The professor stared at him. "Why?"

"I trained myself to resist most sleeping charms if I wanted," said Harry, with a shrug. "It was a precaution against being captured alive. And if I sense something while I'm under the charm, something I think is threatening, I might start trying to resist this one as well."

McGonagall nodded slowly, though there was an ancient sadness in her eyes. Harry wondered if he was really better off for knowing, now, that it probably came from her pity for his childhood. It had been less uncomfortable when he didn't. "I think I can assure you this one will

be strong enough,” she said, and raised her wand, and began to murmur an incantation.

Sleep took Harry like darkness eating the light, and he rather gratefully let himself collapse into its waiting arms. He did hope that McGonagall would find some way to reassure Draco. If not, Draco would probably seek her out and demand an explanation anyway—

He fell.

He woke with a gasp, and the sense, at once, that something was wrong. Of course, something had to be wrong, or he did not believe he would have awakened at all until he was above the lake.

He saw confused, hazy shapes wavering around him, and performed a wandless *Aspectus Lyncis*, which he remembered, just in time, to make nonverbal. He had no idea if the charm McGonagall had performed on him would let him speak underwater. He hesitated, then added a breathing charm, just in case his other one had shattered with the sleep spell.

The shapes around him sharpened at once. Harry turned his head, and found himself tied to a stone that curved harshly, like a fish’s tail. On one side was a small girl he didn’t know, but she had long silver hair that moved back and forth slowly in the currents. He supposed she must be related to Fleur. He turned his head the other way, and stared when he saw Hermione bound to the tail. Krum? Is that why he was scowling the way he was at the Ball, and not paying attention to his date?

Then the shreds of the sleeping charm uncurled, and Harry told himself to quit thinking about inane things, and concentrate on the danger that had awakened him. He stared upward. The water above him was dark, and shifted constantly in swirling patterns, but the *Aspectus Lyncis* let him make out the shapes of stone huts, tethered grindylows, and swimming merfolk. Harry felt his stomach tighten when one of them turned to look at him, and he saw the brilliant yellow eyes staring down through the water. He’d had no contact with merpeople so far. He wasn’t sure what they might want of a vates. Perhaps they weren’t bound—

As if in denial of that, the lake began to burn with a dull gray fire. Harry could make out the shape of the web now, more fluid than any he had seen so far, adjusting to the way that the currents and the waves moved, Harry supposed. The merfolk spun through its loops, but they tracked their progress, slowly and patiently, as if they were all the work of one constantly adjusting spider. Harry shuddered. Was that what had awakened him? The web was one of the more unpleasant he'd ever seen.

Then he realized the web was trembling. Something else was affecting it, something not immediately apparent, something that made Harry wonder if a second vates could possibly exist in the world and be unbinding the merfolk.

He didn't have any longer to worry about it. A most peculiar shape came slicing through the weeds towards the statue to which they were tied. It took Harry a moment to work out Krum, with his head Transfigured into a hammerhead shark's. He dodged easily past the merfolk—who didn't pay him much attention anyway—and the grasping hands of the grindylows, and used a knife stuck in his belt to saw away at the ropes holding Hermione. They parted in a moment, and Krum grabbed her hand in his and hauled her towards the surface. Harry shook his head. Connor isn't going to like losing to him, if he does. Of course, Krum is behind him in points after making the Chinese Fireball smash her eggs, but—

The web trembled again, alternating ripples of light and dark fire. Harry cried out, and a stream of bubbles rose from his mouth, though no sound did. He could feel the ripples in his own body, as though the web were inside him. Or perhaps he was inside it, by virtue of being down in the lake.

Who or what is doing that?

He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate, and at once heard a rising song. It was familiar to him. He'd last heard it in the sky where he circled on thestral-back. Before that, he'd heard it in the wards around Grimmauld Place. It was the music of the Dark, and it was calling.

But not for him, not this time, though it would gladly take him if he'd give in to it. Someone far in the distance was making it sing, making it vibrate as they did—something. Harry jerked his eyes open, and watched again as the lake filled with a haze of magic. The merfolk were swimming in a slow pattern that danced opposite the web's. None of them paid the slightest bit of attention to the gleam of silver that was Fleur's hair as she fought off grindylows, heading for the statue. None of them paid attention to Harry, either. He sensed they had something more important occupying their time.

The web gave a low shudder, and a moan. The merfolk abruptly cried out in a croaking, chattering way, like a band of hoarse squirrels, and flowed together in an opening, closing, unfolding fountain. Harry watched as individual merfolk spun away from each other, long dark green hair flowing behind them. Their skins were gray, almost the color of the web, and they waved their tridents and spears with fervor. Harry heard them take up the song, adding a bass note to the thundering tenor and soprano of it.

He reached out frantically, not sure what he could do, not wanting to break the web without understanding it. Heavy water weighted his limbs as he struggled, and he could see no sign of Connor. He didn't want to break free of the ropes and cause his brother to lose points in the Second Task, but it was looking as though it might come to that.

The gray web rang as if struck with a tuning fork. The merfolk gave a concerted scream that raced up and down the scale. Harry had the distinct impression that the entire world had taken a sharp lurch to one side.

When he could see again, he made out the web still in place, but the outer edges were raveled. Perhaps it had been attached to an anchor, and the anchor was destroyed? Harry didn't know.

His scar began to burn.

He turned his head, and saw Connor coming at last, darting under the merfolk and straight through the coils of the web, since he couldn't see it. His eyes were wide through the bubble of the charm Harry had taught him, and he was all but fighting back terror. He would use the

impulsive courage to grab Harry and pull him back to the surface, Harry knew. Nothing would probably persuade him to come under again. That was all right. Harry knew that if Fleur—caught behind a wall of impressively determined grindylows—couldn't rescue the little girl, she would still be all right. McGonagall had reassured him of that much.

Then Harry saw the dark shape swimming around the edge of a stone hut behind Connor, a long wand clutched in his hand.

His scar burned more fiercely. Harry remembered his vision of Voldemort sending Rabastan to do a certain task—a month ago.

And now he was aiming his wand at Connor's back, this dark shape who might or might not be the same man, and a line of boiling water raced away from it, coming straight at Connor.

Harry made his decision. His brother's life was more precious than his winning the Tournament.

He forced his wandless magic down and into his limbs—much easier to do now that he'd learned to confine it to his body—and snapped the ropes. In an instant, he rolled under and away from the statue, repeating his breathing charm as he moved, and cast a Protego behind Connor.

He had once read that most spells worked differently underwater. So it proved now. His shield gathered material from the lake rather than forming a wall of hardened air or magic; weeds spun into it, and stones, as well as a few startled grindylows. The boiling water hit it and bounced off. Harry was sure the dark man would have cursed; he could at least see a stream of bubbles race away from his mouth. He began kicking forward, obviously desperate to come closer.

Connor was staring at him in astonishment. Harry shook his head to indicate that he didn't have time to explain, and grabbed Connor around the waist. He turned his head to the surface. The merfolk were between them and it, but they were too caught up in their own private celebration. Harry doubted they'd interfere.

He caught a glimpse of Rabastan from the corner of his eye, and yes, it had to be him, since his face was the same as it had been in the vision. That face had turned pale, but it was still calculating, and his eyes narrowed. Then he turned towards the little girl with silver hair, still bound to the rock.

Harry groaned in frustration and spun another Protego directly in front of the girl. He didn't think it would hold while he took Connor to the surface and returned, though, and Connor was already starting to struggle enthusiastically, not liking the tight hold combined with the fact that he was underwater. Harry decided the best thing to do was let his brother fight beside him.

He released Connor's waist and gestured to the little girl and the Dark wizard. Connor understood. He obviously swallowed fear, but he nodded, and then drew his wand from his waist. Given the slowness of his movements, Harry knew he wouldn't swim fast in the attack

Go first, let Connor come up from behind and catch him unawares.

Harry called on his magic again. This had to be flashy, to distract Rabastan from both Connor and the little girl. He cast off bursts of light, gold and red bursts that luckily still worked the way they were supposed to. Rabastan turned towards him.

Harry grimly swam forward, letting the starbursts whirl around him, and thinking frantically. His main disadvantage was not knowing how his spells would work underwater, and he wanted something with non-lethal force. The image of Rodolphus dying in a fall of ashes above this very same lake was still burned into his mind whenever he entered battle. Harry hated killing. It gave people no more chances to change. If he could win the battle and protect Connor and the little girl without killing Rabastan, then he would.

Use defensive magic, then.

Harry cast Haurio. The jade-green shield engulfed his hand, then unexpectedly spread further around him, enclosing him in a bright bubble of air and warmth. Harry dropped to the floor of it, and blinked.

The bubble went on expanding, blanketing the little girl in its protection, and spreading towards Rabastan.

The Death Eater gestured with his wand and spat a stream of bubbles, and the shield stopped. Rabastan eyed Harry for a moment, his head lifted and his lips pinched tight in disdain. Harry stared back. Was this all he came to do? Attack who he could, hurt who he could?

Then he turned sharply, and fired another spell to the side. Harry swung his head, and saw a puff of blood explode through the water as whatever spell Rabastan had used cut deeply into Connor.

No.

The savage strength that rose up in him then wasn't the wild anger that had driven him against Umbridge and Lily; this was the old rage, the kind that had let him fight Bellatrix and Rodolphus on the Quidditch Pitch in the first year. He had been trained to protect his brother, forged to protect his brother. He reached out and drew on what was around him, as he had on the Bludger that returned both Bellatrix and Rodolphus to Azkaban for a time.

The Haurio shield bent a bit, and then exploded. Shards of deep green bubble danced in the water, formed into a school on Harry's will, and flew straight at Rabastan. Slice after slice after slice, and he began to bleed. He was already bubbling as he muttered spells that probably healed his wounds, but the shards turned and came at him again. It would be like being caught in a constant rain of falling glass, Harry knew. At least he wouldn't be able to fire another spell.

He kicked straight for Connor. He was a passable swimmer, and got there quickly. Beneath the thick red water, Connor floated, his eyes shut, the charm around his face at least letting him breathe. A long slice ran from his right shoulder down and across his chest, then turned and swirled across his abdomen. Harry could see the slick gleam of his brother's intestines.

He'll die of blood loss if I don't do something, he thought, refusing to let himself feel emotion. I have to put pressure on the wound.

He bore down with all his might, and called another Protego, this time a small one. It forced itself down onto the injury, treating the blood as the enemy, binding it inside. Harry thought he could depend on the hardened weave of weed and stones to last until he reached the surface.

He turned back around, in time to see Rabastan Vanishing the dark green shards. Then he faced the little silver-haired girl. Fleur, finally free of the grindylows, was coming up as fast as she could swim, but Harry didn't think she would be in time.

She didn't have to be. Harry was rather tired of Rabastan, though still not tired enough to kill him. The tight rage didn't permit that.

Sleep, he thought, in a combination of Legilimency and savage will. He should have done this in the first place, but he hadn't been angry enough to force his command on another person. Rabastan trembled and went limp now.

Harry swam for the surface, his arms clasped tightly around Connor. The Protego held. He would save Connor. None of the intestines had fallen out. His brother was going to be all right. He would hold to that.

He broke the surface of the lake, and his breathing charm dissipated. He could hear shouts from the stands, but they fell into a momentary breathless silence when he hauled Connor onto the shore.

Then shouts rose again, and Harry saw McGonagall coming down at a run, her face deathly pale. A dark shape intercepted her, though. Snape slid to his knees beside Connor and stared at him, then at Harry.

"Get him to Madam Pomfrey," said Harry, not recognizing his own voice. He was freezing in the crisp February air. "Slicing Curse." He turned and plunged back into the lake, renewing his breathing charm, ignoring the shout of his name in Draco's voice.

He dived down again, kicking, squirming, descending. He ignored the gray coils of the web, though they felt slimy as they slid along his skin,

and the dancing merfolk, who stared straight through him. Rabastan was going to be where he left him.

He was. Harry came close enough to see the bubbles rising out of his mouth. His breathing charm still held.

This close, Harry felt himself begin to tremble. He wanted nothing so much as to use the Slicing Curse on Rabastan. That much, he thought, just that much Dark magic, and he could breathe.

Music soared in his ears.

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes, tightly. There were more important matters at stake here, including questions that Rabastan could answer only if he was alive. How had he got into the school, past the wards that Harry had thought were closed to all Death Eaters now? And what had been his mission? To kill Connor? Did Voldemort want the publicly known Boy-Who-Lived dead, so there was no chance Connor could defeat him?

No. No, I don't think so. Voldemort spoke in the vision of causing his enemies pain and worry. I think Rabastan was assigned to kill Connor so that it would affect me.

The rage was close, if he let it in.

Harry did not let it in. He looped the discarded ropes—Fleur had freed her sister, or her cousin, or whoever the little girl really was, and gone—around Rabastan's body and hauled him towards the surface. They reached it easily enough. Harry floated carefully in the water, hearing the eager shouts begin again, then swam for the shore. He let everyone get a good, long look at the floating Death Eater. If his brother wasn't safe anywhere in the school, Harry wanted everyone to know it.

"Who's that?" most people seemed to be asking, which was no help at all.

Harry liked to think that if he were going to be forced into making a dramatic display anyway, then he might as well use it for something.

He pulled Rabastan out of the water and drew back his sleeve, baring the Dark Mark on his left forearm. He held it high.

The screams were instant. Harry smiled. He knew it wasn't a pretty expression, but he could imagine the ripples that would spread out from here. The Daily Prophet would be lucky if it reported the news much before most ordinary wizards and witches heard it by word of mouth. A Death Eater! A Death Eater in Hogwarts!

Harry let out a sharp breath, then, as someone collided with him. He realized a moment later that the arms wound about his waist were Draco's, and that Draco was hugging him as though he were afraid Harry would plunge back into the lake again.

"Don't do that to me," Draco whispered. "Please, don't do that to me."

This is one of the painful things about loving me, Harry thought. All he could really say, as he relaxed into the embrace and rested his arms on Draco's shoulders, was, "I'll try not to."

"Harry."

Harry glanced up at Snape. His guardian wore an expression Harry hadn't seen in months: so fiercely protective that he seemed likely to grab Harry and lock him in a secure room at a moment's notice.

"Your brother will live."

Harry closed his eyes, and wondered how many of the drops of wetness stinging his eyelids were tears.

"And I think you had best bring your prisoner along for questioning," Snape added. "After relieving him of his wand, of course. We will put him in the Great Hall."

"This is to be public, then, sir?" Harry asked quietly.

"Oh, very much so."

Harry looked at Snape on that last word. Snape was staring at Dumbledore.

“I would very much like to know,” breathed Snape, “how, with the Headmaster in charge of the wards, Death Eaters continue to get into Hogwarts.”

Harry shook a bit, but he wasn’t sure if it was with cold or anger. Dumbledore’s face wore the usual calm smile, as he tried to quiet the excited shrieks around him.

“I’d like to know that, too,” whispered Harry.

And why the hell the gray web in the water was wavering, and what Dumbledore knows about it.

Chapter Forty-Five: A Man's Soul May Waver

Harry wondered what he should be feeling as he followed Snape, who was levitating Rabastan, into the Great Hall, and as Draco tagged anxiously after them. He supposed it was almost anything but what he actually was feeling at the moment: a mixture of outrage, irritation, anxiety over Connor, and low-simmering resentment that it took him a moment to identify.

This has happened enough. What else could I do but what I've done? I can't keep Death Eaters out of the school if the wards aren't watched. And if Dumbledore is not watching the wards...

He wanted answers so badly he could smell them. But they had to deal with Rabastan first.

At least Snape was making it public, Harry mused, as Snape bound Rabastan to the surface of the Hufflepuff table with the ropes that Harry had brought up from the lake. His guardian's face was almost calm, but Harry didn't think that would last for long. Snape stepped back when he was done and glanced once at Harry.

"You have his wand?"

Harry nodded and patted his robe pocket, where Rabastan's wand lay. It had sparked at him when he picked it up, perhaps reflecting its owner's anger, but as long as it was actually separate from Rabastan's hand, it could not harm anyone else. Harry would keep a hold on it just in case Rabastan had the ability to summon it to him.

"Good," said Snape, and then aimed his own wand at Rabastan. "Ennervate!"

Rabastan twitched, once, and then woke up. Harry could see the moment when he realized he was captive. His eyes widened once, and then he turned his head and met Snape's gaze with the calmness of someone who expected torture and was bracing himself to resist it.

“Severus,” he said. “I haven’t seen you in a while. Still defending children, I take it? And enjoying it? I suppose such a life would content someone who had the smallness of soul that enabled him to turn from our Lord.”

Snape showed no reaction to the taunts, but watched Rabastan with a still face. Harry heard a slight murmur behind them, and glanced over his shoulder. Most of the Tournament crowd had filed in. Harry could make out Krum and Fleur and their former hostages near the front. Zacharias Smith had found Hermione and was expostulating at her. Hermione ignored him entirely, eyes on Rabastan. Harry wondered if she was fascinated by the chance to see a real live Death Eater up close, or if she wanted to see the person who had nearly murdered Connor face justice.

Draco peered into his face, and Harry gave him a half-smile and touched his arm before turning back to the interrogation.

“I want to ask you this only once, Rabastan,” said Snape. “How did you get into the school?”

Rabastan snorted at him. “And what makes you think that I’m going to answer, Severus?” He appeared a bit bolder now. Maybe the lack of thumbscrews comforts him, Harry thought. “The secrets of our Lord are his secrets alone, and I would rather go to jail than betray them. I’ve done it before.”

“You faced Ministry interrogators then,” said Snape. “Aurors. Perhaps Unspeakables.” He spun his wand through a few lazy revolutions. “The difference, Rabastan, is that this time you’re facing me.”

Rabastan tilted his head, eyes glinting. “I’m not going to tell you anything. I said that already.”

Snape stood still. Harry could sense the coiled strength gathering in him, though, and wasn’t surprised at all when he said only, “Pity.”

He performed a spell then. Harry supposed that it must have been nonverbal, which was its own pity, since he didn’t recognize the effects. Rabastan’s mouth went slack. He stared at the air in front of

his own face, and then whimpered, an astonishing sound. Harry could see his eyes dilating with the force of his terror. He trembled, and tried to lift a hand to shield his eyes, but the ropes had done their work, and he could only spasm a bit.

"I will give you to them," Snape said. "You know they don't eat enough, Rabastan. Tell me. How did you get into the school? That is twice that I have had to ask that question. I shall not ask a third time." He moved his wand a bit, and Rabastan let out a pitiful scream.

Harry searched inside himself for some compassion for Rabastan. He found none. This was the man who had tried to kill Connor, who had probably come to kill Connor, who had almost succeeded.

I don't want him dead, but I want him to suffer.

And there was the dark rage he had despised in himself, rising again. Harry took a deep breath, and trampled it down, and took several steps forward until he stood beside his guardian. Rabastan didn't look at him, though Harry had thought he would at least merit a glare.

"Professor Snape," he said softly. "Please stop, sir. This isn't the best way to get answers out of him."

Snape looked at him, and said nothing. Rabastan was gasping now, sobbing some words out and choking others. Harry listened, but could make out nothing more than "wards." This wasn't helping them, and now he suspected that Snape had wanted to use whatever spell this was partly because he was angry.

He thought Finite Incantatem as strongly as he could.

Rabastan gave one more great jerk and then relaxed against his bonds. Snape continued watching Harry. Harry ignored him. Let the watchers think Snape had given in to mercy and ended the spell of his own free will. He leaned forward and said, in a voice that he at least managed to make soft if not friendly, "What was that? How did you get into the school?"

“Don’t ask a third time,” whispered Rabastan. “I told you. One of the Dark Lord’s servants helped me find a way through the wards. They were weak already.”

“Weak already.” Snape’s voice was flat. “What does that mean?”

“I think that you should let me take over the interrogation now, Severus.”

Harry could feel Dumbledore’s power filling the room as he spoke, as if he carried a cloak of light about him that he had spread and shaken. The air seemed sweeter, and Harry heard some of the watchers let out a rising and falling murmur that complemented the subtle song of his magic. Everything would be all right, said the voice of that magic, as long as everyone trusted in the Headmaster and let him handle things. More than just an edge of compulsion was wed to it, and Harry wondered for a moment how many of Dumbledore’s famous speeches, the ones where he managed to reassure everyone and coax them into facing Voldemort one more time, came from his magical strength and not his oratory.

Snape wavered. He would be fighting the blow in his head, Harry knew, but the suddenness of it and the sheer strength made it impossible for him to oppose Dumbledore immediately. He stood in silence, and made it look as if he were acquiescing. Dumbledore nodded and turned to Rabastan.

Harry raised his own power.

At once, the Headmaster turned to look at him. His eyes were narrowed, his face still deceptively kind.

“Would you make this the kind of contest you spoke of wanting to avoid, Harry?” he murmured. His lips barely moved. “The kind that would destroy half of Britain if we began it?”

“No, sir,” said Harry. He stared hard at Dumbledore’s eyes, and wondered what was behind them. Had Dumbledore lost the brilliance once attributed to him, or had he misplaced it, or had most of it not been more than trickery in the first place? Of course, that did not

matter, because this was most assuredly trickery now. It was only Harry's curiosity that made him want to know.

"Then, please, step back and let me handle this." Strips of steel undergirded Dumbledore's voice.

"You didn't care until Rabastan spoke of a weakness in the wards." Harry turned back to face the Death Eater. "What did you mean by that?"

Dumbledore's magic rose and slid across the room in a silently rolling wave. Harry could feel his head reeling, as though he were beneath the lake again, this time without a breathing charm. Compliance suggested itself in every heartbeat, in every passing moment. It would feel so wonderful, so right, to yield to Dumbledore's greater power. Everyone who met him did, save the wild ones like Voldemort, who were madmen anyway. There was no shame in it. No one would blame Harry. He was following a wizard older and stronger than himself, and that meant that whatever happened wasn't his fault.

Harry could feel the sweetness in such yielding. He'd found it a lot during the first eleven years of his life, when doing something wrong would have been hard even if he dared to think about it much, and to go along with the orders his mother gave made the world so simple.

He was too used to fighting now, though. He braced himself, and shook off the magic, plunging his head back into the clean air.

The strips of compulsion uncurled from his mind. Once again, he could see Dumbledore as he was: an immensely powerful wizard, with his own store of wisdom and experience and knowledge of the ways of war and sacrifice, but not the benevolent god that his magic had presented him as. Harry folded his arms in towards his body, his panting deep and strident.

"Don't try that again, sir," he said.

Dumbledore merely looked at him in silence, and then said, when some moments had passed and the loudest sound near Harry was Rabastan's harsh breathing, "Try what, Harry?"

Harry closed his eyes. The dark rage was rising again. He really wanted to hurt someone. At this point, though, he wasn't sure if the impulse came as much from a desire to revel in pain as because he thought it might finally get things accomplished.

"You are being stupid, and we do not have time for this," he said, his voice clipped. He turned to Rabastan. "You had help from a servant of the Dark Lord's. What servant of the Dark Lord's?"

Rabastan stopped breathing for a moment. Then he shook his head. "That you will have to tear from me," he murmured. "If you do not already know this, then you shall not learn it from—"

"Legilimens."

Harry didn't tear into Rabastan's mind. He didn't need to. He skimmed in through Rabastan's eyes, and into a thick, clinging mist that he suspected was not a protection, but the natural state of the man's thoughts. Rabastan was an unlikely candidate to be a practicing Occlumens.

The fog around him writhed for a moment, then blew aside, and the image that Rabastan was thinking about most strongly whirled up behind his eyes. Harry saw Moody with the silver collar around his neck, one hand extended as though he were grasping someone's arm.

Harry rode the wind back out again, and dropped Rabastan back on the table. The man didn't seem to know quite what had happened. Harry spun, and intently scanned the crowd, still standing tame and docile under Dumbledore's power. He could see Professor McGonagall, Professor Sprout, Professor Flitwick, Professor Sinistra craning her neck to see from the back...

No Professor Moody.

Harry's mind locked on to the obvious. Rabastan's strike failed. So he's going after Connor instead.

“Moody,” he snarled at Snape, and crouched, pressing against the anti-Apparition wards. In a way, he didn’t want to do this, since he would be shaking when he got to the hospital wing, but Merlin knew what might happen to Connor in the time it would take him to run up the stairs.

He felt someone grip his shoulder just as he jumped, and Harry grabbed the hand back, managing to Side-Along Apparate the person with him. Unsurprisingly, when he dropped out of the tight-squeezing leap and rolled on the floor of the hospital wing, it was Snape who fell to one knee beside him.

“I told you so that you could stay behind and inform the others!” Harry snarled, forcing himself up again. “Now what’s going to happen if we both die up here, and no one else except Rabastan knows—”

“Imperio.”

The calmly-spoken Curse soared past Harry, though he felt the wind of its cruel passage. Harry saw Snape’s face become incredibly calm. There was a brief flicker, as though he were fighting against the spell with all his Occlumency, but it subsided in a few moments.

Just as the dragons did. It would take someone with an Imperius Curse of incredible power to do that, and to capture Snape—

Mulciber. I should have known.

Harry turned in time to see Mulciber, no longer Polyjuiced or Transfigured into Moody, rise from behind the nearest hospital bed. “Wretched, to crouch like that,” he remarked, swatting dust from his robes. He stepped forward. He was wearing a robe fitted for a smaller man, as Moody was, and the bared Dark Mark on his left arm was enough to make Harry’s scar glow in dull pain. The silver collar still encircled his neck. “But I had to be sure that you wouldn’t see me immediately and do something that you would regret.”

“You bastard—” Harry said.

Mulciber, his eyes fixed on him, didn't speak aloud, but the next moment Harry heard a dull thunk from his side. He turned to find that Snape had picked up a knife sitting on a table, no doubt to cut clothes or tight bindings away from a patient if a spell wouldn't do any good, and stuck it into his own hand. Blood flowed from the wound, which was deep enough to cause permanent damage if not treated, but Snape's expression didn't change.

Harry tried to think of Snape with damaged hands, missing hands, and felt his stomach rebel.

"I can have him remove his fingers," said Mulciber, his voice low. "I thought Rabastan would betray me. I have no options left, Potter. You're talking to a desperate man here. I have nothing to lose. Do not push me."

He paused, then added in a lighter tone, "And even if you were willing to kill your guardian, I don't think you're willing to let me kill him." He gestured at the seemingly empty bed, and the Disillusionment Charm rolled away, revealing Connor. He was bound in bandages, but Harry could see that his open, glazed eyes also bore the look of Imperius.

Mulciber turned back to Harry. His face was calm, but there was an underlying excitement that told Harry he was on the edge, soothing expression or not. "I rather think," said Mulciber, "that we should come to an understanding."

Harry watched him, breathing hard. He could probably blast Mulciber before he could order either Connor or Snape to do permanent harm to themselves.

Probably.

But he had heard stories of what Mulciber was capable of doing during Voldemort's War, including commanding victims to drop dead of heart attacks. His control of the Imperius Curse was very fine. Harry could not be absolutely sure that Mulciber would die or fall unconscious before he sent an order like that at Snape or Connor, and that was an unacceptable level of risk.

"All right," he said. "Talk to me. What kind of arrangement are you talking about?"

Mulciber stared at him intently, then said, "I think you can put the knife down now, Severus. Stand beside the table where you put it, just so that Potter here doesn't forget what I could have you do."

Harry watched as Snape obeyed the order with a perfectly blank face. Oh, Merlin, you must be fighting so hard inside your head right now. I'm so sorry, sir.

"Now, Potter, I suggest you cast a locking charm on the door," said Mulciber, his eyes hard. "I have Madam Pomfrey sitting comfortably in her office, but it won't be long before someone else comes here, and I would rather not be interrupted. Your magic is more powerful than mine."

Hating himself, Harry looked at the doors to the hospital wing and poured out a flood of pure will, as he had when he made Rabastan go to sleep. The doors gave a deep shudder and then ground together in a way that said they wouldn't be opening for a while. Harry felt sick fear swirling just beneath his stomach nonetheless. Dumbledore would be able to command the doors to open if he really tried, as the ultimate master of Hogwarts in times of danger.

"That will do," said Mulciber. "Now, Mr. Potter, do you realize that you have given me the hardest time in making my decision?" His voice was quite cheerful.

Harry turned back towards him, and told himself to ignore whatever he might think of the encounter's surreality. This was quite real, and someone was going to die if he forgot it. "I don't know what you mean."

Mulciber moved back near the head of Connor's bed. One hand reached out, and Harry had to watch as Mulciber stroked his brother's hair. "I mean that for some time now, I have been doubting whether the Dark Lord's service is really what I want to do with my life," the Death Eater said. "Granted, I went to Azkaban for him, but since my release, I've had to watch every plan that I was told would work

thwarted at every turn. Even my coming here in disguise as Moody didn't do much good, not when Bellatrix's first attack on you failed and then I realized you would sense almost any use of the Imperius Curse the moment I made it. I tried talking to you, seeing if there was anything in you that we could use, and of course the crowd at the First Task made the Curse safer than usual. But you foiled all my tests. You've convinced me that you can resist my greatest weapon. More, I'm convinced that you can resist the Dark Lord. I don't want to be on the losing side. I've had enough of that—thirteen years too much of that. I want to strike a bargain with you."

"A damn strange way you've got of doing it," Harry whispered. "I can trust nothing you say, you realize that?"

"Of course you can," said Mulciber. "Understand, I was meant to make much more progress here than I have. But I haven't made much, and it's only partly because my Lord told me it would be easier to get control of you than it is. I wanted to avoid your notice if I could, but I was also trying to limit my crimes, so that they wouldn't tell against me too much when I made my final appeal to you. I had to cast the Curse at the First Task, and I had to test it on you, and I had to let Rabastan through the wards, only because my Lord commanded me to, and disobeying those orders would have revealed my wavering loyalty to him. But, otherwise, I have caused you far less damage than I could have, Potter."

Harry turned and stared at his brother.

"Rabastan was assigned to kill him," said Moody, without a trace of apology in his voice. "Not me. I did try to persuade him out of it, but he was adamant that our Lord wanted it done perfectly. He's a coward, anyway, under pressure. I could never have trusted him. Nor should you, even if tries to claim that he'll give you evidence willingly."

"You were here," Harry whispered.

"Only because I knew what the consequences would be when you brought in Rabastan alive, with you a Legilimens, and I wanted to be sure that I could make you listen to me." Mulciber gave Connor's hair another stroke. Harry choked on his rising gorge. There were other

stories about Mulciber, too, stories that made Harry flinch when he wondered if any of the younger children were missing memories. "I'm only trying to secure my position, Potter, my position and my life. I've seen what you are. The tests taught me that. I was trying to cast the Curse on you during that little duel we had, without you noticing under the cover of my simpler spells, and it didn't even work. Your mind's too well-trained for my subtler efforts, and I think you remember the one overt effort I made, don't you?"

Harry nodded. His eyes were fastened on Connor. He had an idea now, but the time it would take, the time... It made him despair.

It's an unacceptable risk.

"Yes, I thought so. Damn Memory Charms won't work on a damn Legilimens most of the time," muttered Mulciber. He tilted his head, and his eyes glinted coldly at Harry. "But, I assure you, let me turn, and I'd be loyal enough to you. You're going to win the War. You're strong in a way that the Dark Lord could not be, because he can't inspire enough loyalty, and Dumbledore's blinded himself. You've accepted other former Death Eaters. Why not me?"

Harry could have listed the differences between someone like Hawthorn Parkinson and someone like Mulciber for minutes on end, but he preferred to say, "You didn't say anything about Dumbledore noticing your use of the Imperius Curse. Why was that?"

Mulciber snorted. "Oh, I'm certain that he must know something. I enchanted Professor McGonagall and told her to put your name in the Goblet of Fire, back when I thought this waiting game the Dark Lord's playing had a chance in hell of working. It would have bound you to compete in the Tournament; it should have, since you're the strongest wizard here. But Dumbledore interfered. He would have known that your name went into the Goblet, though, when he examined it."

Harry swallowed, twice, before he could say, "So he knew that someone here had put my name in the Goblet?"

“He would have known, yes,” said Mulciber blandly. “Of course, he would have seen that it was McGonagall if he looked, and I Obliviated her after she’d done it, but he would have been able to find me if he’d looked hard enough.” He tapped the silver collar. “Would this have kept a Legilimens as skilled as he is out? Who knows?”

Harry tried to tamp down the bubble of rage. Dumbledore hadn’t been letting a Death Eater run around the school knowingly. The silver collar was a factor. The ones on the Hounds the Ministry had interrogated had almost killed them when they came off. Dumbledore might well have sensed that the collar was linked to Moody’s—Mulciber’s—life and backed off from killing one of his professors. Besides, Mulciber was trying to flatter Harry into accepting him. He was going to say anything he could to make himself sound wise, knowledgeable, attractive.

But Dumbledore had known someone had put Harry’s name in the Goblet of Fire, and he had never mentioned it.

Headmaster, you and I will have much to talk about when this is done.

“I want to know about the wards,” said Harry, carefully letting no animosity color his tone. “How did you let Rabastan in? How did Bellatrix attack, for that matter? I know you must have been the one who sent her wand back to her,” he added.

Mulciber smiled. “Very good, Potter. Well, the wards have been weakened by a number of things.” He leaned against Connor’s bed, as though he were in for a long storytelling session. Harry clamped his lips down on the growl he wanted to give when Mulciber’s hand wandered to Connor’s shoulder. “I’ve been keyed to the wards as most of the professors are, and I used that to let Bellatrix through. Of course, I’ve been casting Imperius when I thought you wouldn’t notice, or when you were absent from the school, and getting some of the professors to weaken the wards—small holes that no one would notice without a close inspection. But part of it was caused by Dumbledore’s incompetence. That will not have surprised you, of course. He’s been paying attention to the wards in the school, which he can use to spy on people, and that draws his attention and energy away from the ones on the outside. The wards of Hogwarts are linked

to its Headmaster in ways that go back to the Founders' times, and which I certainly don't completely understand. They draw on his strength. Usually, of course, that wouldn't be a problem, since Dumbledore's so powerful. But in this case, he overlooked the holes I had the professors create, and he may have made them bigger, since he was diverting strength normally used outside to the inside. He's not used to using all these wards in the windows and the walls. He's overtaxing himself." Mulciber gave a nonchalant little shrug, watching Harry closely.

The rage was choking Harry, sticking strong claws through his skin. He felt as if he were bristling with thorns. His desires had shifted, and at the moment, it wasn't just anyone he wanted to see bleeding, it was Dumbledore.

So he's been spying on us, too. Or on me, I suppose it's safe to say.

Harry closed his eyes and mastered his rage. Just in time, too, as someone knocked on the doors.

Harry looked back at Mulciber, and saw his eyes flick in the doors' direction. "Well, Potter?" His voice was light, but tense. "What's it going to be? Are you going to accept me, or do your mentor and your brother die? Or worse, you know," he added, softly. "Some of those people they think are mad from the Cruciatus in St. Mungo's are those I commanded to act as if they were suffering intense pain."

Harry stared into his eyes. There could be no question of accepting someone who did this and showed not the slightest bit of remorse as an ally. On the other hand, the one plan he had thought of, being able to enter Connor's and Snape's minds and pick the Imperius apart as he would a web, was simply not going to work. He wasn't familiar enough with the Curse. The one time he'd destroyed a mental web without study—the web of Remus's Obliviate—it had nearly been a disaster. And Mulciber might sense him moving in their thoughts, too, and that would be the end as soon as he began it.

Mulciber's eyes darkened as he watched. "Choose, Potter," he said quietly, as steady pounding began on the door. "I told you, I have nothing to lose. I'll still have the pleasure of making you suffer if you

don't see sense." His hand tightened on Connor's shoulder in silent warning.

Harry shuddered a bit. He could not use Legilimency on Mulciber, or the same silent command that had made Rabastan sleep, since he could not get through the barrier of the silver collar. There was really only one plan he could think of, and he would have liked some extra time to nerve himself up to doing it.

No time.

"Choose, Potter."

Harry gulped and nodded. "I have," he said. "I—I'll accept you. I can't not do it." He paused, and tilted his head at an arrogant angle. "Just make sure that you've told me the truth, that's all."

Mulciber's face melted into a smile. "I assure you," he said, "you won't be able to catch me lying." He glanced between Snape and Connor. "Of course, I don't think I'll take the Imperius off them just yet. I want some guarantee from you first, such as an oath."

"An Unbreakable Vow?" Harry asked.

Mulciber blinked, startled, but then nodded. "That will work," he said. "Severus can act as our Bonder."

Harry knew he would get no better chance, with Mulciber turning towards Snape to call him closer. He had hoped to win his brother and Snape free of the Curse first, just in case, but there was no time.

I am the one who will have to live with myself afterwards.

Harry fixed his eyes on the silver collar around Mulciber's neck and pushed his wandless magic outwards, hard and fast, giving no warning of his actions, not changing his expression. Break.

The silver collar shattered into a thousand ringing shards, and Mulciber dropped to his knees with a scream of pain. Harry had already moved, had already willed it.

He had willed it, and so the silver shards turned, arrested in their flight, and cut straight into Mulciber's throat.

The scream cut off into a choking gurgle, and then Mulciber's life poured out of him in a red flood. He landed hard on the floor. Harry knew the moment when he died; it came within a moment after the shards pierced him.

He shut his eyes, shaking.

He couldn't just have thrown up Shield Charms in front of his brother and Snape. That wouldn't protect them from the monster lurking in their heads. And Mulciber might have been able to concentrate through the pain of the collar's breaking and reach out at any time, faster than Harry could get him to go to sleep. Even this plan wasn't without risk; maybe Mulciber would use that split second to make his enemies suffer rather than suffering himself.

But he hadn't been able to, as great pain was followed with greater pain, and then death on its heels.

Harry swallowed, and wondered if it was a good thing or a condemnation of himself that his eyes were dry. He turned to face Snape, and saw sense and awareness returning to his face, along with burning fury. He obviously knew something of what had happened to him, and hated it.

Harry nodded, walked up to him, and clasped his wounded hand. "You should get Madam Pomfrey to look at this, sir."

Snape reached out with the unwounded hand and held Harry's chin tightly for a moment, staring into his eyes. Harry stared back steadily, until he thought Snape might have seen what he wanted to see, and then wrenched away and looked at Connor.

His brother had fallen back into unconsciousness. Harry relaxed. I'll tell him eventually, but better if he doesn't remember anything of this while his pain is so great.

“Mr. Potter, what—“

Pomfrey’s speech died as she saw the body on the floor next to Connor’s bed. She blinked, then turned to Snape, apparently operating on instinct as she cast a spell to heal his hand.

The pounding on the doors was intense now. Harry wearily willed them into letting go of each other. They sank back into the natural shape of the stone, and then opened at once as an excited flood of professors and spectators poured through.

Harry closed his eyes. I killed someone else. Someone is dead because of me.

But now I know I would do it again. He was threatening them. He needed to die. There was no other plan I could think of so quickly.

“Harry. It was not your fault.”

Harry opened his eyes at his guardian’s voice, but didn’t turn to look at him. “I know,” he said quietly. “I did what needed to be done. Maybe that’s one lesson I’ve learned now, not to leave my enemies alive behind me.”

He caught a glimpse of a white beard through the crowd, and his rage spiked.

“Excuse me, Madam Pomfrey,” he murmured. “Is Professor Snape fit to come with me?”

“I am perfectly capable—“ Snape began.

“Shut up, Severus,” said Madam Pomfrey. “Yes, Mr. Potter, he will do. But don’t ask him to hold his wand in his right hand for some hours yet.”

Harry nodded, his eyes still fixed on Dumbledore. This has gone on long enough. Dumbledore is going to listen to me this time. And I know what punishment I’m going to exact on him, once I’ve determined exactly what the state of the wards is.

There are a lot of things I should have done before and didn't do. Well. Now I know to do them.

"It is most unusual of you to wait for someone else, Harry," Snape muttered, as he stepped up beside him.

"I need you with me," said Harry simply. "I want you to restrain me from killing the Headmaster, if it comes to that. And with the mood I'm in, it might."

He set off through the crowd with a determined stride. Dumbledore had backed out of the room, but he would not go far, and Harry would find him even if he did.

It is time to make it clear where we stand.

Chapter Forty-Six: Harry's Stake

Draco had followed everyone else to the hospital wing, though he'd lingered behind out of necessity. Harry's distress reached across the distance that separated them, as piercing as the exhaustion that had made Draco faint on the day before the First Task. This time, though, he couldn't faint, because the emotions were not exhaustion—a simple heavy pressure—but the chill slime of guilt, and the stone wall of determination, and a vision of looking down a long, starless well that Draco had learned to identify as Harry's self-loathing.

Harry might have survived whatever happened in the hospital wing, but he would need Draco when he came out.

And he did, for all that when he finally managed to force his way through the crowd outside the doors of the hospital wing, he didn't look as if he needed anyone. Draco caught his breath at the sight of Harry's face, so grimly resolved that he thought his father would have bowed his head and stepped aside. Harry looked as if he were going to an execution or a battle. He hated what he was doing, or so Draco knew from the emotions he radiated, but nothing would stop him from doing it. Events had finally kicked him past his reluctance to bring attention to himself, or to interfere with other people. Things were going to happen now.

Draco pushed himself away from the wall, letting his own pride and awe and love support him in the face of those overwhelming emotions, and stepped up to Harry's side.

Harry's green eyes had been absolutely fixed on the path ahead of him, as if nailed there, but they turned and met Draco's now. They flickered when Harry realized who it was. He inclined his head in a rapid nod, and then turned forward and strode on again, as if pushed by a great wind.

Draco smiled and fell into place at Harry's right shoulder. He may hate what he's going to do, but not everyone does. I rather intend to enjoy it. I'm just glad that he doesn't have empathy that matches mine.

Harry hated on what he had to do as he walked.

He was setting the limits in his mind, drawing them sharply, reminding himself of what he could not do, no matter how angry he became. There were Snape and Draco behind him—and he trusted Draco to restrain him even more than Snape—but they were more flexible on matters of free will than Harry was. They might think it reasonable for Harry to do everything that was against Dumbledore's will, simply because the Headmaster was an enemy right now.

Harry didn't want to. He had had enough of that. He would demand information. He would make absolutely sure that Dumbledore had rules established for his interaction with the wards and the protection of the school after this. He would make it understood how very, very displeased he was that Dumbledore had told him nothing about McGonagall also entering Harry's name in the Goblet. Dumbledore had rigged it so that only Connor's name would come out, of course, but that still meant he had no right to ignore the danger Mulciber presented. He should have told Harry about this on Christmas night, if not sooner.

Harry could feel the throb of the Headmaster's power spreading out before him. Dumbledore had retreated to the Great Hall, and gone no farther. He intended to make a stand there.

Harry wondered why at first. The more public this was, the worse it would be for Dumbledore. But he understood it when he stepped through the doors of the Great Hall and met a number of skeptical and surprised gazes. Dumbledore was using mild compulsion on the witnesses. What they saw might not be what they thought they were seeing.

Harry snarled in spite of himself, and felt the Dark rage, thestral-like, stamp its hooves inside him. This was why he might lose control and destroy all his own fine intentions. He could have dealt with Dumbledore endangering him as only a breach of his promise, the way he could have dealt with Mulciber threatening him as just what a Death Eater would do. For someone to threaten his own life was no more than what he expected. To threaten or hurt other people...

This must be dealt with first.

Harry took a moment to glance over his shoulder and make sure that Snape and Draco were free. Snape nodded slightly to him, indicating that he once again had his Occlumency shields braced against the onslaught, though he might not be able to speak. Draco moved nearer and rested his hand on Harry's shoulder. The slight haze in his eyes cleared at once.

Using his empathy and his focus on me to chase away the compulsion, Harry decided, and then turned to face Dumbledore.

"Let them go," he said quietly. "Now."

The Headmaster watched him in silence for long moments. He had a look that Harry had never seen in his eyes before. This was probably the way he appeared on the field of battle, Harry reflected. His gaze was clear, but testing, and his magic swirled lazily around his body, a barely visible silver shimmer in the air, gathering and coiling its strength beneath it like a tiger about to spring.

"I would feel better," said Dumbledore at last, "if I knew what you were planning."

"I am planning to make you answer for your crimes," said Harry. "And that means that you will answer me as to the state of the wards, as to the state of the gray web holding the merfolk in the lake, as to why a Death Eater could roam the school unsupervised and cast the Imperius on the professors, and as to why you never informed me that Professor McGonagall had put my name in the Goblet of Fire."

"I did not."

Harry blinked at McGonagall as she stepped forward from the crowd of mute, fascinated, staring people. He frowned when he looked at her, and especially when he saw Dumbledore's frown. Apparently, McGonagall should still have been under his compulsion. How had she broken free?

A line of blue light crawling down from the ceiling answered that. It lapped around McGonagall's feet like a pool of spreading water—one of the wards of Hogwarts, reaching out to her.

Harry gave a smile he was sure was hard, and glanced at Dumbledore. "The wards seem to prefer the Deputy Headmistress to you, Headmaster," he said softly. "Is that because you've been abusing them?"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "You do not know what you are saying, Harry," he murmured. "As always, you think only of the immediate ramifications of your actions, and not of the consequences that might lie out of sight. Consider what will happen if you drag private matters into the public sphere."

"I hardly think your incompetence a matter for privacy any more," said Harry, moving a few steps forward. "Professor McGonagall, you were put under Imperius to place my name in the Goblet of Fire, and then Mulciber, in disguise as Moody, Memory Charmed you into forgetting that you'd done it. Dumbledore would have known at least that you had put my name in, if he had looked. Given that he's using these wards to spy on people, he could have known far more than that. But he never bothered to inform either you or me."

"You cannot trust what a Death Eater tells you, Harry." Dumbledore's voice was deep, a song of flowing water. The people under his control were swaying slowly back and forth, Harry noted, though the motion was so slight he would not have noticed it if McGonagall weren't standing still. "I did not investigate the matter because I assumed that Minerva simply wanted you to enter the Tournament. That is all."

"I do not feel I can trust you either, Light Lord." Harry tilted his head back. "Release these people."

"Harry—"

"Do you really fear them seeing and hearing the truth?" Harry asked. From the storm gathering in McGonagall's face, he could see why Dumbledore would, but he could hardly admit it if he wanted to

present himself as acting in good faith. "Release them. I will not ask you again."

Dumbledore just shook his head, his face now wearing a patient smile. For all his wariness, Harry thought, he still believed he could win, and that it would just take a few stronger applications of his old tricks. "Harry, you are a child in age, for all your experience. There are many things you do not understand about politics in the wizarding world. I am a Light Lord, as well as the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and you cannot simply command me."

"I warned you," said Harry quietly, and awoke the snake that lived in his magic.

He hated doing it, but the hatred did not keep him from opening the snake's jaws and beginning to eat Dumbledore's magic, any more than his sorrow and rage last year had kept him from pinning Connor to the wall when he crossed a certain line. This had to be done. Dumbledore would never believe him in earnest if Harry did not back up his threats. And the one good thing about doing this was that Harry spared anyone else from having to make the same decision.

Lily had often told him that what set Dumbledore apart from other wizards was his capacity for making the hard choices, the ones that other people would dither over until it was too late. Harry would have to be able to make them, too.

And it is harder than I ever believed it was, away from the comforting security of knowing what my place is in the world, and knowing that there's an absolute good in protecting Connor and fighting the Dark Lord. I have to judge what's good and what's evil on my own, now, and there is so much chance of making a mistake.

So I'll decide, and if I make mistakes, I will face them.

Dumbledore's power washed towards him, and poured smoothly down the snake's throat. Harry had done this once before, though then he hadn't realized what he was doing; he had simply ripped and torn at Dumbledore's magic, seizing it indiscriminately. Now, he had learned a bit better, and directed the snake to eat the compulsion on

the witnesses. Witches and wizards stirred and began to buzz as the snake steadily swallowed more and more.

This power, unlike that which he had stolen from Voldemort and the Death Eaters last year, did not make Harry ill. It was the magic of a man who had dedicated his life to Light, after all, no matter how much he had slipped up in these last years. Harry therefore did not vomit it back up, or need to use it for something else immediately. He made it part of himself, pressing the alien power into his own until they blended seamlessly together.

The raw power pouring from his body grew stronger and stronger, strong enough to sing in his ears, and Draco gave a drunken little giggle behind him and whispered, "Your magic smells like roses."

Odd, Harry thought, but then could pay it no mind as Dumbledore began to fight back.

The magic glimmering around the Headmaster formed into a vortex and headed straight for Harry. He didn't know if it was the result of a spell or a specific gift of Dumbledore's, and he had no time to find out. He lifted a hand, and his wandless magic poured easily through his skin and formed a Harry-shaped barrier that extended out and in front of him. The vortex met it, and both it and the barrier shimmered and vanished as though they were mist burned away on a summer morning.

Harry lifted his head with difficulty, and fixed his eyes on Dumbledore's. The snake hissed, wanting to eat more of the Headmaster's magic, but Harry restrained it. He had made his point, from the terror behind the mask of calmness on Dumbledore's face.

Besides, he'd eaten enough that he would really hate to absorb more, at this point. He felt top-heavy. It would take him some time to become accustomed to the new weight of power.

"I can stop now," he said quietly, though he knew Dumbledore would hear every word, even under the excited, confused buzz coming from behind him. "You have two choices, Headmaster. Oppose me, and you'll lose more of your power. Yield to me, and you at least have a

chance of getting out of here with some of your magic intact.” He forced his lips to move into a smile. “I promise nothing about your dignity.”

Dumbledore continued staring for a long moment. Harry could all but feel his mind racing, as though he had swallowed some of his thoughts, too. There were other plans he could make. There must be other plans he could make. Dumbledore was used to fighting back, through war after war when it must have seemed as though the Dark would win. Normally, nothing could stop him. There must be some third option he could find, some way out of the tight bargain Harry proposed.

Perhaps, if he had had more time or hadn't been in front of a crowd of staring outsiders, including his own outraged Deputy Headmistress, Dumbledore might have found a way. As it was, he bowed his head, once, his eyes still glimmering with battle-readiness. “Ask your questions, then,” he said.

Harry nodded, once, and put the snake to sleep. “Why did you leave holes in the outer wards?”

“I did not know they were there until I began to inspect them after you captured Rabastan Lestrage.” Dumbledore was trying hard to make it sound as though this were not his fault, but his voice was not as melodic and reassuring as usual; Harry had stripped him down to near bone, and it showed. “Then, yes, I found many small holes that Mulciber must have worked to expand into larger tears, and others that had not registered as holes, but as doorways opened by professors keyed to the wards. Those are ordinary occurrences, as when Professor Snape wishes to bring in potions ingredients that the protective spells in the wards might object to. Normally they are closed at once. That did not happen this time.”

“And you did not sense it?” Harry demanded. He had to raise his voice slightly as the voices of the witnesses turned into shouts of anger and disbelief. “You did not close the doorways when they didn't shut on their own?”

"I did not pay as much attention to them as I should have," Dumbledore admitted. "I was concentrating on the inside of the school, and I can only spend so much time in contact with the wards before I must retreat and rest. That is why the professors are keyed to the wards in the first place," he added, obviously trying to regain some face. "They are responsible for making sure they shut the doors they open, rather than leaving such duties entirely up to the Headmaster."

"Rather hard for them to remember it, when a Death Eater is using Unforgivable Curses on them. Why did you pay more attention to the inner wards, at the expense of the outer?" Harry heard at least some people muttering in confusion about the Death Eater and the Unforgivable Curses, but he would make them understand in a moment. For now, he wanted to hear the reasons from Dumbledore's own mouth. Mulciber would have said anything to save his life. He could have been lying.

"I was watching matters inside the school," Dumbledore began.

"Spying," said Harry coolly, and heard several outraged gasps.

"I was watching," Dumbledore corrected him, tone going frosty. Harry suspected they were near the limit of how much he could push the Headmaster without backing up another threat. "I wanted to be sure that the students inside the school were safe. Matters are delicate in the time of the Tournament; it's not unknown for students from different schools to develop intense rivalries, when they are quartered so close together. And, of course, when we have a fourth-year student with the power of a Lord walking about, it pays to keep a close eye on him."

A few gasps trod on Dumbledore's announcement. Harry wondered if it came from his admission, or if there were some people who had not believed that Harry's power was Lord-level until Dumbledore confirmed it.

He will turn this back against me if he can. I must not let him.

“You devoted so much attention to the inner wards that you neglected the outer ones,” Harry summed up. “It was negligence, and not malice.”

Dumbledore obviously wanted to find something to say against that, but with Harry cutting down the options to two—negligence or malice—he must have realized that a denial would make it seem as if he had done it on purpose. The best he could do was say, “Yes. I should have paid more attention.”

Harry shook his head. “Do you think, Headmaster, that you deserve to remain in charge of a school where you care more about watching the students than the students’ enemies?”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened. Harry simply stared at him. He did not know if he could get Dumbledore actually backed out of the Headmaster position—he suspected not, not when the admission was negligence and not malice—but if he made one broad threat, then he could look compassionate and humane when he put restrictions on Dumbledore instead.

Yes, I can look that way. And I make myself sick with these lies. Of course, I don’t like being honest, either. I wish that I could sit in a corner and not have to speak at all. I wish everyone would leave me the hell alone and not pay attention to me.

Someone moved at the edge of the crowd behind Dumbledore, where McGonagall still stood with the ward coiled around her feet. A moment later, Lucius Malfoy was bowing with poise Harry had never seen from him, his voice helpful and solicitous.

“Forgive me for interrupting, Mr. Potter, Headmaster Dumbledore,” he said, “but I came to witness the Second Task. I sit on Hogwarts’ Board of Governors, and I considered it my duty. Mr. Potter, I am sure that the other members of the Board could be called together, if it is deemed necessary. Most of them are deeply concerned with the school’s safety, as their own children—and my own son—live here ten months out of the year. We could hold a vote. The Governors, voting unanimously, can sack the Headmaster.”

Harry met Lucius's eyes for a moment, and saw a chill gleam of amusement dart out of them. He was playing the game, then, and would follow where it led. He would not push for Dumbledore's sacking if it proved impossible, but he had added a new pressure, to show that the Headmaster had more opponents than one child.

"I made a mistake," Dumbledore was saying now. Harry felt his power briefly flex, as if he were about to throw it over the minds in the room or add it to his voice, and then he obviously remembered what Harry had done to him the last time he compelled people. His magic settled back down again. "I must confess, I am old and sometimes do not think as closely about things as I should, but I would never willingly endanger Hogwarts." Harry could hear the ring of sincerity in his voice, and knew that that alone, along with Dumbledore's reputation, would convince a great many of those watching. "It was the result of carelessness on my part, and not malice. I have already admitted that. I do not see that I should be sacked for a mistake."

Harry lifted his head consideringly, and glanced at Lucius. "Hmm. What do you think, Mr. Malfoy? Is the Headmaster of Hogwarts allowed mistakes?"

Lucius curled his lip to hide laughter, but gave a judicious nod. "I think so. He is only human." That would strike a blow against Dumbledore's invincibility in some of the listeners' minds, Harry knew. "I am sure the other governors will agree." That would mean Lucius was not sure of persuading everyone else to vote against Dumbledore, Harry knew. "But what are we to do to make sure Hogwarts is safe? I would not leave my son in a school where Death Eaters can intrude at will." There could be no doubt that Lucius was laughing on those last words, not if one knew him.

"The Headmaster has many burdens to bear," said Harry. "He has already admitted that. Perhaps some help?" He faced McGonagall, and saw her eyes slowly widen as she realized what he would ask of her. "Professor McGonagall, you are Deputy Headmistress. The wards seem to like you. Would you object to being more keyed into the wards? Perhaps bearing some of the burdens that Headmaster Dumbledore now carries all alone?"

McGonagall slowly inclined her head.

“Minerva has many tasks of her own,” said Dumbledore, now attempting a jovial tone. “She is Transfiguration professor, and the Head of Gryffindor House. Would you make her busier yet, Mr. Potter?”

“I am willing, Albus,” said McGonagall firmly. “I should not have left it this long, truly.” She drew nearer the Headmaster and patted his arm tenderly. Harry could not help but be impressed, to see any Gryffindor act so well in the face of open stares. “I should have sensed what you were struggling through and helped you before this. I am sorry for my own negligence.”

Dumbledore’s face reflected his inner struggle, but in the end, as Harry had known he would, he had no choice but to give in gracefully. Admitting he had made a mistake was one thing, refusing help for it another. He nodded and said, “I will key Minerva to some of the wards. I swear it by Merlin and my magic.”

Harry lifted his head. “Now, Headmaster, will you still find it necessary to watch the students inside more than the enemies outside?”

Dumbledore looked at him, narrow-eyed. Harry looked back. In some ways, of course, their respective positions were absolutely ridiculous: a fourteen-year-old boy chiding a wizard over a hundred and fifty years old, the defeater of Grindelwald, a Light Lord and Headmaster respected by thousands. But Harry knew—had realized, in a way he had not, before—that strength of magical power was a trump card to nearly everything else. He might not be able to demand that Dumbledore step down as Headmaster of Hogwarts, but he could demand some consideration from him. And Dumbledore would have to listen. Harry’s right to demand this much was in every breath of the magic that radiated from him.

I hate it.

Harry shoved the thought away. There was no time for it right now.

“I will not,” Dumbledore said at last, “I am certain, if I have someone at my side to share the burden.”

Harry nodded. “And now, Headmaster, about the Death Eater roaming the halls—“

“What is this?”

Harry turned his head, and caught Rita Skeeter’s eye through those enormous glasses she wore. He stifled the temptation to shake his head. She had her quill hovering above her notebook, poised to take down whatever he said.

“Professor Moody, hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts at the beginning of the year,” said Harry, his voice as steady as he could make it, “turned out to be the Death Eater Mulciber, one of Voldemort’s servants, who escaped from Azkaban last year.” He ignored the gasps and flinches when he mentioned Voldemort’s name. Possibly he could have been more diplomatic and used one of the evasive titles instead, but he hadn’t thought of it, and he wouldn’t change it now, which would make him look weak. “He was the one who helped Rabastan Lestrangle get through the wards, and used Imperius on various professors to bespell them into creating still more holes in the wards. Then he used Obliviate to make them forget what they’d done.”

“Where is he now?” asked Skeeter, her voice trembling with something Harry suspected was eagerness. He wondered if she would have tried to track down Mulciber and interview him, if he was still alive.

“He is dead,” said Harry quietly. Gasps sounded around him. “He faced me in the hospital wing and tried to make me a bargain for his freedom and life, bragging all the while that the Headmaster had not the least idea of what he’d done. I made a collar he wore to protect his mind explode, and the explosion killed him.”

Some of the members of the audience edged backward, and Harry understood that, too. If this was going to be utterly in the public eye, then his own reputation would suffer along with Dumbledore’s. This

was why it would take some time to move Dumbledore out of the Headmaster's position. Some governors were likely to vote for him to stay not out of approval of his actions and motives, but out of distrust of Harry's.

"So we have only your word for it, then," said someone from the side. Harry glanced towards her, and made out the eager brown eyes of yet another witch holding a notebook. This was probably one of Rita's rivals, he thought, perhaps even another reporter for the Prophet itself.

"I was there," said Snape softly, his hand tightening on Harry's left shoulder. "I can confirm his story, and both of us would be willing to testify under Veritaserum."

"But aren't you Professor Snape?" asked the woman, her quill scribbling away furiously in her notebook. "The boy's guardian? I don't think that you would have an unbiased view of the matter."

"Show me someone who has an unbiased view of Death Eaters who hold them under the Imperius Curse, madam," said Snape, his voice growing extremely dry.

She blinked at him, obviously uncertain.

"Headmaster," said Harry, before they could wander too far afield. "I want to know why you never sensed Mulciber's deception."

"The collar," said Dumbledore at once. "The Hounds in the Ministry wore similar collars. When they were removed, they nearly killed them. I did not wish to harm Professor Moody. I had no reason to doubt that he was the real man, as he had picked up odd habits in his old age and his paranoia. I believed the collar to be merely another of them."

Harry nodded. It was the answer he had anticipated Dumbledore would give. "And you picked up nothing strange about him in all your spying through the inner wards?"

Dumbledore winced and gave him a helpless glare. Then he said, "No."

"So perhaps watching through the inner wards is not as profitable as you deemed it to be, then?" Harry pressed. "Perhaps it should stop?"

There came a sharp inclination of Dumbledore's head. He would have said something different if they were not in front of an audience, Harry thought. But then, everything would have happened differently if they were not in public.

"Good. I'll hold you to that, Headmaster." Harry pressed onto another subject. "And why did you not inform me about my name being placed in the Goblet of Fire? Didn't it concern you that someone submitted my name?"

"No," said Dumbledore quietly. "You are the most powerful student in the school, my dear boy." The word student was stressed just slightly. "It is not unusual that someone should be convinced that you would win if they submitted your name. The competition between the three schools has always been intense. If you could win the Tournament, you would bring honor and glory to Hogwarts." He paused, his eyes challenging. "But the Goblet chose your twin instead."

"Yes, it did," said Harry. He wondered if he should reveal that it had been Dumbledore who had made sure of that.

A movement off to the side caught his eye. He turned his head, and James was there, standing on the edge of the crowd where Lucius had been, his face helpless.

He came.

Harry swallowed. Explain Connor's name in the Goblet, and then he would have to explain why Dumbledore was so insistent that his twin compete, and that would lead to the reasons he had for wanting to control Harry, and that would lead to the whole mess of Lily and James and Harry's home life and his training.

He held the power to destroy both Dumbledore and his father right now, not to mention Lily. Child abuse was a taint that would stick and stink, not a mistake to be excused with a claim of an old man's forgetful memory. Harry had seen reports of child abuse trials dragged on for months and months in the Daily Prophet, and even in cases where the allegations turned out to come from a misunderstanding, a reek clung to the names of the parents involved forever after.

He would drive Dumbledore and his parents from any semblance of a normal life if he revealed the truth now. That would alienate James, permanently, just when he was making some kind of gesture of reconciliation. It would turn Dumbledore into the kind of man Mulciber had been in the last moments of his life, with nothing else to lose, and no reason to hold back on doing the utmost evil he could.

And it would bring him into contact with Lily again, and hurt her when Harry only wanted to be done with her. And it would all but ruin Connor's life, at a time when he was still under the stress of the Tournament.

And it would have everyone staring at him. It would convince most people that he was a victim, that he was deserving of pity.

Neither Harry nor his allies could afford that, at this juncture when he had to be strong. Harry himself did not think he could take it. He never wanted anyone to think him weak, that he was in some need of comfort or coddling.

Harry turned away from that poison, and said only, "And the web on the merfolk, Headmaster? I could see it coiling when I was under the lake. Something was happening. The merfolk barely interfered with the Champions when they came to rescue their prized people. Why?"

Dumbledore sighed and closed his eyes. "The webs and spells which keep us safe from the merfolk," he whispered, "are three-cornered. One is linked to the selkies of Britain, one to the merrows of Ireland, and one to the sirens of Greece, as they are the three most vicious tribes of their kind, and the three most likely to harm humans." He opened his eyes again. "One of the webs has been torn free from its

anchor. From the immense distance involved, I would say that the sirens of Greece are free, and that they have become part of Lord Voldemort's armies."

Harry shivered. He closed his eyes as shouts and loud denials exploded around him—wizards denying everything from Voldemort still being alive to sirens being of any good to anyone, since all they wanted to do was sing and enchant humans.

They are Dark creatures, then. Their voices compel people. No wonder I was hearing the Dark music sing under the lake water.

Voldemort does have the power to destroy a web. He can't manage most spells without a wand, but if he simply sent raw power flowing at something...who knows what he could accomplish? Or perhaps he possessed someone else and lent them magic enough to break the spell.

I wonder why I didn't dream of this? Then Harry grimaced as he remembered the sleeping enchantment McGonagall had put on him. Perhaps the vision did try to come, but it couldn't get through the barrier of that spell.

"I believe the webs on the selkies and the merrows should hold," Dumbledore was saying, when Harry opened his eyes again. "They have been destabilized, but not completely torn. They will hold firm. That is, as long as no one interferes with them." He gave Harry a warning glance.

Harry stared steadily back at him. He hardly intended to dash out to the lake and free the merpeople there. He had no idea how they would act once they were free; at least he had made sure the Dementors could harm no one, and the unicorns were creatures of Light who never would. He knew so little about merfolk that he would have to study them before he decided what to do about the webs.

He looked around the room, and realized that the news of the sirens' freedom and Voldemort's return had put a stop to the questioning. Most people looked ill. They wanted to go away and chew on

everything they had heard. Skeeter was already gone, and so was her brown-eyed rival, presumably to write up their articles.

“Can I trust you to keep honest?” Harry asked Dumbledore. “To accept restrictions on your use of the wards, and Professor McGonagall’s being keyed into more of them? To not use compulsion any more?” He let the snake flex around him, reminding Dumbledore of what would happen if he did not comply.

Dumbledore bowed his head, slowly, proudly.

“He will have me to keep him honest, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, sliding an arm through Dumbledore’s. “I will make sure of it.” Her eyes met his, still angry.

Harry nodded to her, and turned on his heel. He could see James coming towards him, but he couldn’t spare the time to deal with his father just yet. There was someone else who needed his help.

“But what makes you think that Moody is still alive?” Draco complained, then ducked as Harry lost patience with the locking spells on Mulciber’s door and simply blasted the damn thing open. Harry collected the splinters of wood as they tried to fly into the hall, and shifted them into a pile on the floor. Snape stepped up beside him, wand drawn, though he relaxed when they found themselves looking into a fairly normal room. Harry hadn’t thought that Mulciber would have any Dark artifacts lying about anyway—the possibility of discovery was too great—but the delicate wooden tables, silvery carpeting, and large bed seemed too innocent.

His gaze drifted over and fixed on a large trunk at the foot of the bed. It had enough locks on it to qualify it as suspicious. He strode towards it, while behind him Snape lectured Draco.

“Mulciber was using Polyjuice to resemble Moody, Draco. What have you learned about Polyjuice?”

“That it takes a month to brew,” said Draco, sounding confused. “That it requires hair from a living subject, though the—” He paused. “Oh.”

“Oh indeed,” said Snape, and then came up beside Harry, who was studying the locks. “Perhaps you are looking for these, Harry?”

Harry glanced up as Snape handed him a bunch of keys. He blinked. “Where did you get these?”

Snape nodded at one of the wooden tables. “There, under a Disillusionment Charm.” He raised his eyebrows. “You did not notice the Charm?”

Harry felt his cheeks heat up, and shook his head. He was simply moving too fast, running on too much adrenaline. He sighed, murmured, “Thanks,” and fitted the first key into the first lock.

That revealed a bunch of books, but unless Mulciber had Transfigured Moody—and Harry did not think he had, as he would have to have hair for the Polyjuice—he wasn’t there. Harry shut the trunk lid, as it was the only way he could fit the second key into the lock, and this time revealed a goodly number of quills, pieces of what looked like a smashed Foe-Glass, and a subtle shimmer that proved to be an Invisibility Cloak when he thrust his hands into it.

Harry shut the lock with a shake of his head, then tried the last key on the ring, and the last lock on the trunk. This opened into a chamber that seemed to spiral straight down into the middle of the floor, though really, Harry knew, it led into the middle of the trunk. He had started to set one foot on the series of steps curving along the stone wall when Snape seized his arm.

”Where do you think you are going?” he hissed in Harry’s ear.

Harry stared at him, then stepped out of the way while Snape cast several sensing spells on the stairs to reveal any traps. He rubbed his face. He could have done that if he’d thought of it. He just wasn’t thinking. His entire body seemed to be twitching, consumed by the need to move, to do things.

He jumped when a hand came to rest in the middle of his back. He relaxed, however, when it started to rub. “Hush,” Draco whispered to him. “It’s all right.”

Harry wanted to say it wasn't, but he could feel the hand relaxing him, and he nodded and waited in forced patience while Snape finally, grudgingly, conceded that Harry could go down the steps, as long as both Draco and Snape followed him.

They descended into a stone room that would have fit seamlessly into one of the dungeons at Hogwarts, and was equally bare of decoration. On the floor, senseless, lay a thin and heavily scarred man, half-naked. Harry winced at the sight of him. His hair was ragged from multiple cuts, and his ribs stood out under his skin, and he was covered with bruises and minus his wooden leg and magical eye, but there was no doubt that this was Moody.

Harry knelt down beside him and shook him gently, ready to jump out of the way if he struck; it wasn't a good idea to wake a trained Auror too suddenly. However, Moody's eyes slid open to reveal a glazed expression, and Harry nodded. He'd guessed that the man would be under the Imperius Curse. Mulciber wasn't one to leave a dangerous opponent lying around without it.

"Finite Incantatem," Harry whispered, and his magic surged out and wiped the Curse from Moody's mind. Moody blinked his one eye at him, then abruptly growled and reached for a wand that, of course, wasn't there. Harry made a mental note to find it.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" was the first thing the real Moody said to him.

Harry smiled in spite of himself. "Someone come to rescue you, sir," he said. "You've spent months at the bottom of a trunk that I guess you own. Mulciber, one of the escaped Death Eaters, impersonated you and used your hair for Polyjuice Potion. I'd guess he kept you under Imperius most of the time."

Moody reached up and felt at his hair, then grunted, seeming to accept the truth of Harry's story. For all his mistreatment, he sat up with an agility that impressed Harry, and scanned the bottom of the trunk. He dismissed Draco, but his eye locked onto Snape, and he issued a low growl. "Death Eater bastard," he said.

“Moody.” Snape didn’t sound best pleased, and he kept hold of his wand as though he were about to use it the same way he had on Rabastan. Harry made a mental note to find out what that spell that had so unnerved the Death Eater had been. “You know full well that I was part of the Order of the Phoenix, and that I spied on Dumbledore’s orders.” He paused, then added delicately, “Though no longer.”

Moody laughed, a sound that reminded Harry of one of Sirius’s bark-like chuckles. He held out an arm, and Harry supported him without further question, holding him upright as he swayed on his one leg. “Who do you serve now, Snape? Changed your mind and decided to go crawling back to Voldemort?”

“No,” said Snape. “I walk at Harry Potter’s side. The boy who rescued you, Moody.”

Moody turned his eye sharply back on Harry. “I did ask who the bloody hell you were,” he said, as if it were Harry’s fault for not telling him earlier. “Potter, eh? I know your father, and I remember reading you about in the Prophet before—all this happened.” He grimaced as if he’d bitten into something foul. “Where’s Mulciber, anyway?”

“Dead,” said Harry quietly.

“Harry killed him,” Snape elaborated, ignoring Harry’s glare effortlessly.

Moody paused a moment before he turned his head back to Harry, as if he’d been waiting for his magical eye to look at him first. “I bloody hate having a blind spot,” he said. “You killed a fully-trained wizard? A Death Eater?”

“Only because I had no choice,” said Harry. “Can you walk, sir? I’m sure that your wooden leg and your magical eye can’t be far away. We’ll get you out of here and reunited with them, and then you should go to St. Mungo’s, I think. They can treat you there.”

“No need, Potter.”

Harry jumped in shock, though he couldn't do much of that when he was under the weight of Moody's arm. Luckily, Snape and Draco had both pivoted already to point their wands at the two women who'd descended the stairs. Harry wondered if he should be reassured or not that he recognized both: Auror Mallory and Tonks.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, ignoring Moody's muttering about his secret room becoming a "blasted parade ground."

"The Minister is here," said Mallory. "So of course we came along. The reports of Death Eaters at Hogwarts have reached us by now." She bared her teeth a bit. "I regret to say that I can't do it myself all the time, since I am the Head of the Auror Office now, but the Minister's decided that there need to be Aurors in Hogwarts. A rotating guard of, say, five should be sufficient."

Harry blinked his eyes. "And you'll take Moody and Lestrage?" he asked.

"Of course." Mallory bowed to Moody. "Auror Moody is an old and valued comrade. And we should have Lestrage anyway, for questioning. We should have had him from the beginning." She gave Snape a mildly disapproving glance. Snape ignored that, too, focusing on something that he looked far more interested in.

"What has the Headmaster to say about Aurors in his school?" he asked.

"He isn't being given a choice," said Mallory. "The Minister's assigning them, and his authority to assign the Aurors to such guard positions overpowers the Headmaster's right to object. Besides, who can object to guardians who will add to the children's sense of safety? I'm sure most parents will be in favor of the move." She had a self-satisfied look, Harry realized, and he doubted that it was a coincidence Scrimgeour had chosen her to head the Auror Office.

"Indeed." Snape resembled Auror Mallory more than a touch in that moment. Harry let out a cautious breath of relief. He still needed to speak with Snape, that much was plain, but perhaps his guardian

would be satisfied with this form of revenge and not go against Dumbledore.

"I assume the Minister wants to speak with me?" Harry asked.

Mallory nodded, and moved over to assist with Moody. Tonks, her hair bright green, started forward to help, but tripped over her own feet, so Mallory sent her up the stairs to find Moody's wand. "He wants to ask you some questions about Mulciber's death, Potter, and how Lestrangle intruded."

Harry wiped at his eyes. Scrimgeour, James, Snape...then I can go off by myself and think about this. "Of course."

As it turned out, the interview with Scrimgeour was mercifully short. He asked a few pointed, penetrating questions that Harry suspected came from Auror interrogations, then pronounced Mulciber's death a clear case of self-defense. He would have to speak with Amelia Bones, still the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but he didn't think she would demand a trial. Harry sagged in relief.

The only remotely worrying thing the Minister said came as he was leaving. He said, his eyes studying Harry's, or perhaps the lightning bolt scar on his forehead, "I think I told you once that I had an ability to sense Dark magic, by virtue of using only Light spells all my life."

Harry nodded.

"I sensed an enormous explosion of Dark magic here on Christmas night," said Scrimgeour quietly. "It must have been powerful indeed, for me to receive so many echoes in London. Would you care to explain what that was about, Mr. Potter?"

Harry swallowed. "No one died, Minister. One person was hurt, but Madam Pomfrey healed her."

"No one died," Scrimgeour said. "But I think you are wrong about only one person being hurt, Mr. Potter." He paused a moment, as if debating, then said, "The Ministry keeps records of travel through the Floo network, you know. There was one name on the list of arrivals at

Hogwarts on Christmas Eve that caught my eye. Lily Potter.” He looked hard at Harry. “Could that have something to do with it, do you think?”

“She’s resting at our old house in Godric’s Hollow,” said Harry, his own voice sounding hollow and mechanical to his ears. “You could go visit her if you like. I’m sure that she would tell you she was fine.” She would, Harry knew. Lily and Dumbledore would hardly admit what had really happened that night to anyone; it would ruin them as well as Harry.

“I’m sure,” said Scrimgeour. “But she made you powerfully angry, Mr. Potter. And given that, and what you said at your guardian’s trial only a few days before, I have been turning certain things over in my mind. Piecing the evidence together, you might say.”

Shit. Harry had confessed to not feeling safe with his parents at Snape’s trial. He kept his face as bland as possible. “I hope that you catch the perpetrator, Minister,” he said.

Scrimgeour smiled. It was a faint expression, with his lips pressed together, and as dangerous as a mouthful of teeth. “I’m sure I’ll run them to ground eventually. Good day, Mr. Potter.” He turned and swept out of the Great Hall, trailing several Aurors who’d come along behind him. Moody and Rabastan floated in their midst on conjured stretchers, as did Mulciber’s body. Mallory remained, with Tonks, assigning some others to guard positions.

Harry stood where he was for a few moments, calming his breathing. Then he turned. James would be up in the hospital wing, with Connor.

“What did he mean, Harry?” That was Draco’s voice, low in his ear. “You’re radiating panic hard enough to—” He paused. “Do you think that he knows about your parents?”

“It’s not that I’m afraid of that,” Harry whispered back. “But I’m afraid of what he might do with the knowledge.” And he was. Scrimgeour was relentless—patient, but relentless. Harry did not want to think what would happen if he brought James and Lily up on charges.

The only thing that Harry couldn't figure out was why Scrimgeour would expend the effort. He was Minister now, with dozens of more important tasks occupying his mind. He and Harry had done each other favors in the past, but this would be something more than a favor. He would probably put other investigators on the case instead, Harry concluded, and they would be unlikely to find as much. He made himself stop worrying about it.

"He would do only good things, I am certain."

Harry abruptly turned. Perhaps I should have my conversation with Snape now. Most of the spectators had left the Great Hall before his conversation with Scrimgeour, hurrying home to spread the news by firecall or owl post, and many others had been herded away by the Aurors. Not too many people would be around to see him and Snape talking.

"Sir," he said, "I think there are some things you should understand."

Snape's eyes widened minutely, but he nodded. "I am listening, Harry."

Harry glanced at Draco. "Do you want to tell him about what you gained, or should I?"

Draco gave him a dirty look, but nodded and stood a bit taller. "Sir, I'm an empath now," he said. "Julia Malfoy, whose ghost I summoned on Halloween, gave me that gift. I'm a Malfoy magical heir now." He smiled. "My father will wait at least a year to be certain about it, but he'll introduce me as his own heir soon."

Snape nodded, face shadowed. "Congratulations, Draco. I fail to see why Harry would wish me to know this, however."

"Because Draco is aware of my emotions," said Harry. "That means that I accept I can't hide from him, and I trust him with more of myself than anyone else." Draco sidled a step closer to him. Harry couldn't feel emotions himself, but was fairly sure that Draco would be radiating delight. "And I know he loves me, too." His voice still cracked when he spoke the words aloud. He determined to ignore it.

“What I say to him, or what he says of me, is the truth. I know that we haven’t been very close since you came back from your trial. I would like to be able to trust you again, the way I trust Draco. For that to happen, you’ll need to stop planning revenge on my parents and Dumbledore.”

Snape stilled. Then he said, “May I ask why?”

“Because I don’t want anything to happen just because of what they did to me,” said Harry. “Never again. That period of my life is closed. And if—“ Merlin, this is hard. I hate honesty. “I do want a parent, you’re my best choice, but I can’t have you planning revenge on all and sundry. I can’t trust you if I think that you’re going to hurt me by making me relive my past at any moment.” He took a deep breath, and met Snape’s eyes. “I want to stay with you this summer. I want to have a proper guardian, not just in a legal sense, or just one who’s opposed to my parents. I need to know that I really am more important to you than your grudge against James.”

Snape made a low sound. “Of course you are, Harry.”

“But it doesn’t feel like that.” Harry moved a step forward, and felt Draco lean fully against him, arms falling to clasp together around his waist. He resisted the urge to wriggle out of the hold. “Please, Professor Snape. Promise me that you won’t seek revenge against them.”

Snape dropped to one knee. “They deserve justice for what they did to you, Harry,” he said quietly. “And I fear that you will never heal until they receive that justice.”

“I am healing,” Harry objected. “Draco won’t let me be anything but honest with him now. And I can heal even more with two people I can be honest with, as long as I know that you aren’t doing something I really, really don’t want you to do.”

Snape sighed, a sigh that seemed to drag out most of his grief and set it hovering in the air between them. “This matters that much to you, Harry?”

"It does." Harry feared what Scrimgeour would do if he discovered the truth about his parents, but he feared more where and how Snape would strike if he kept running this path of vengeance. Scrimgeour was at least scrupulously loyal to the law. With him, it would be a trial. With Snape, it could well be torture. Harry had seen how close his guardian's Death Eater side sometimes was to the surface. He did not want to encourage it—for Snape's sake as well as his own and his parents' and Connor's.

"I promise."

Harry blinked. He'd been so caught up in his thoughts that he had barely heard the whisper. "What?"

"I promise," said Snape. "So long as you are in need of healing and safety and a guardian first and foremost, Harry, I swear that I shall do my best to protect you. In the name of Merlin, you are more important to me than a stupid grudge from my schooldays." He paused, and seemed to be fumbling for words. "It will be hard to be civil around your parents or the Headmaster, but I promise that I will not hurt them."

Harry stepped forward, pulling gently away from Draco, and put a hand on Snape's shoulder. He didn't want to force him into a public embrace right now. "Thank you. That was what I wanted to hear."

And he did believe Snape. His own shoulders felt lighter, and the thought of dealing with his father in the hospital wing was no longer so terrible.

"Do come talk to me soon," Snape murmured as he clasped Harry's hand. "I would like to hear about Draco's empathy, and—much of the rest of it."

Harry nodded to him. "I will." Then he turned and made for the hospital wing. Halfway there, he noticed Draco walking beside him. He gave him a strange glance.

Draco gave him another one back, as though to say Harry had been stupid to think he'd let him go anywhere alone.

Harry rolled his eyes and continued climbing the stairs. He just hoped Draco didn't make his conversation with James any harder than it had to be.

James started up anxiously from beside Connor's bed when Harry entered. He came a step forward, then stopped when Draco followed and looped his arms possessively around Harry's waist again. Harry couldn't help a fretful wriggle this time, since this felt too good and he didn't like the temptation to lean back against Draco, but the arms stayed in place.

"I promise I'll be good," Draco whispered coaxingly, and Harry gave in. To have Draco behave was well worth the potential discomfort. He raised his eyes to his father's.

"I was watching the Second Task," James whispered. "I—decided I should come and see it, since my sons were in it. But I couldn't see clearly when Connor was injured, and then I had no idea what was happening until after you came back to the Great Hall." He let out a sharp breath and glanced over his shoulder at the hospital bed. "Lestranger could have killed him."

"He almost did," said Harry. "I'm only going to ask you this once. Did you know anything about Lily and Dumbledore's plan on Christmas night?"

James shook his head. "No. I—Lily sent me a letter telling me about it, in detail, afterward. But I swear to you, Harry, in the name of the sunrise our ancestors came from, I didn't know." His eyes, large and too dark in his pale face, met Harry's entreatingly.

Harry nodded, slowly. "And are you going to be a pain in the arse about Professor Snape being my guardian, or not?"

James said nothing for a long time. Draco muttered something inaudible, but Harry nudged him, and he shut up. Harry didn't think his father was refusing. He was thinking, and sometimes, that took him a long time.

James turned to look back at the bed again, then at Harry.

"I saw what you did today," he said. "And I—I don't think I can object any more, Harry. There's no point in trying to rebuild the kind of relationship we had when you were a child." Draco muttered something else, but James didn't pay any attention, and Harry forced himself not to. "You're a young man, not a child, and while I'd still like to be part of your life, I can't replace what Snape is to you."

"What about Connor?" Harry asked.

"He'll have to decide for himself." James paused, then said, "I was going to suggest in my next letter that you two consider coming to Lux Aeterna for the Easter holidays, but I don't know how well he'll take it. He said—he wrote me a letter yesterday that—" James shook his head and broke off.

"He will have to decide for himself," said Harry, unsure how well Connor's decision to forsake his parents would stand up in the face of this subdued, quiet James. "So will I, for that matter."

James nodded. "What do you want from me right now, Harry?"

Harry had to study James in silence before he could say anything. James looked sincere enough now, but he'd looked like that before, at the end of last year, and that hadn't turned out to mean anything. Harry had no obligation to give him a second chance. After what he'd done, bringing charges against Snape and then sending only silence, and then the Pensieve, and then the sharp letters, Harry knew that most people would think him totally justified in throwing his father over.

But he'd trusted Snape when he said that he would change, and he did not truly think James could be trusted less than Snape, altogether. Harry certainly had less trust in him at this moment, but he trusted no one with much except Draco.

I could do worse than to set limits.

"I want you to go home," said Harry. "I want you to write letters to me that actually talk about you, and what you're doing, rather than trying to convince me to abandon Snape. I don't want you to come and visit me unless I specifically invite you. I don't want you to mention the Easter holidays again, or press me about them, and I don't want you to mention Snape at all."

James nodded. "I can do that."

He didn't ask for more, didn't press, and Harry marked that down, carefully, as one possible difference between him and the old James.

"Connor will have to make his own decisions," he said. "But if I find out that you're trying to use or pressure him in any way, then that's the end. I'll cut off all contact between us."

"I understand," said James.

He didn't make another move, didn't say another word, just continued to gaze at Harry beseechingly. Harry wondered what he wanted from him. There was no way that they could have anything normal.

In the end, Harry didn't want to try that, either. He didn't have anything else to say to this man whom only blood connected him to.

He turned and walked calmly out of the room, his pace forcing Draco to loosen his hold around his waist. Behind him, he heard James move to resume his place at Connor's bedside.

Harry would have thought about staying, too, but he didn't want to stand in awkward silence with James, and Madam Pomfrey had assured him that Connor wouldn't awaken before the morning, anyway; she'd put him under strong sleeping charms to give the healing magic time to work. He wanted, more than anything else, to go to his room and consider the events of the day and be alone. His plan, he quickly discovered, wouldn't work, and that was because of Draco.

Oh, Draco glared Blaise and Vince out of the room quickly enough, his face telling them that now was not the time to press Harry for the details of any of his exciting adventures. But then, when Harry sat down on his bed and said, "I'm fine, you can go now," which should have been his cue to leave, Draco sat down beside him instead.

Harry stared hard at him. "I said, I'm fine, and you can go now," he repeated.

"You didn't have an 'and' in there the first time," said Draco. "That proves I heard you. And I don't care, Harry. You shouldn't be alone right now."

"I should," Harry said. He could feel the emotions he'd pushed away waiting to swamp him. He would probably break down, the calm part of his mind noted. He didn't want anyone seeing that. He wanted to curl up and lick his wounds, and the easiest way to do that was by himself. "I have to think things through."

"You mean, brood on them."

Harry shrugged. "There will probably be some of that in there, yes," he said, and closed his eyes. Mulciber was dying, and the water was filling with blood as Connor caught the Slicing Curse across his abdomen, and Scrimgeour's yellow eyes were shining thoughtfully as they tracked the path of pieces of information to its logical end.

"You're forgetting again, Harry," Draco whispered, as his arms slid one more time around Harry's waist. "I'm an empath. I felt your emotions earlier. You hate yourself for what you've done. You hate all of this, violently—being a leader and putting yourself in the public eye and the attention that's going to come along with it. And I don't think that it works for you to bury this and sit on it in silence. It didn't work with your mother."

Harry flinched. "Don't touch me, please," he said.

Draco let him go at once, but Harry could feel his gaze on the side of his face. He refused to open his eyes. Not only would looking at Draco make things worse, but that wouldn't allow Harry to see his

own visions of what had happened today as clearly. He had to look at them, to categorize the emotions that had come with them and decide how he was going to think of them, so that he could put them away.

“Why not?” Draco asked.

It took Harry a moment to connect the question with his declaration. He hesitated, but Draco had become scarily good at telling when he lied, and anyway, there weren’t many deceptions he could use that Draco would believe. “It feels too good,” he said. “I’m going to—I don’t know, do something like lean against you and cry if you touch me, and I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to be weak,” Harry snapped in exasperation. That much, Draco should have known. Mulciber died behind his eyes, and Harry wondered if there was anything else he could have told them about Voldemort’s plans. That was a reason to regret killing him, but not the strongest one. He had still been a living wizard, capable of changing. Harry still did not see what else he could have done in that situation, but he was determined to think of it with horror, so that he would never use his power casually, the way Dumbledore and Voldemort had done.

“Why not?”

“Will you ask something else?”

“All right,” said Draco, calmly. “Why do you think you’ll be weak if you do something like lean against me and cry? I’ve seen you cry before. I don’t think you’re weak, Harry.”

Harry let out a harsh breath. This will be hard to answer, but if it gets Draco to go away and leave me alone, it’s worth it. “Because this is only the beginning of the war,” he said. “Things like this are going to happen all the time—people getting hurt around me, people dying, me killing people, people staring at me.” People seeing me. I hate that. “I can’t get used to crying about it now, or I’ll never be able to stop. I thought it would be easier than this, because I had the training

to prepare me. But it isn't, and that means that I'm not as strong as I should be yet. So I'm trying to finish the process."

"Fuck that," said Draco, his voice rough, and grabbed Harry and dragged him towards him.

Harry struggled for a moment, but then, just as he had been afraid would happen, the warmth crept in around him, and he found that he didn't really want to move. And oh, Merlin, he was going to do something soppy any moment. And he just couldn't afford that. He had to make conscious decisions, analyze what he had done, and know his own reasons for his own actions. He regulated his breathing and refused to let the tears burning behind his eyes fall.

Why am I crying anyway? I learned a valuable lesson from Mulciber's death. Connor will live. The Aurors took Lestrage away. Moody was rescued. Snape and Dumbledore and James all know what they have to do now. I have nothing to cry about.

The most satisfactory answer that came to him was exhaustion, but he'd slept deeply under the influence of the sleeping charm, without interruption, until the moment when he awakened under the lake. That couldn't be it. He hadn't had anything to eat today. Maybe that was it.

And if Draco would just stop touching him, Harry thought he could hold on. At the moment, Draco had shifted to lean against something, the pillows or one of the bedposts, and tilted so that Harry's head was tucked in under his chin. He was cradling Harry's shoulder with one arm, and running his free hand up and down Harry's back, and it felt incredibly good, and it terrified Harry beyond measure. He tried to curl in on himself, but the position Draco had him in wasn't a good one for it. He could feel his breath quickening with panic. He didn't think he could hide anything like this, even the few things he'd managed to conceal successfully from Draco.

I don't want someone seeing me. This is stupid. I can't do this. I'm supposed to be strong, and no matter what I am, a vates or an ally or a leader or a rescuer, that's true. I can't be strong like this.

What terrified him the most was that he couldn't just lash out with his magic and get free of Draco that way. His own reluctance to hurt Draco, and his own shameful desire to stay exactly where he was, got in the way.

"Please," he whispered. "Please, Draco, let me go."

"Not this time," Draco whispered back. "Most of the time, Harry, I would. But sometimes you make the wrong decisions. And this is one of those times." He rubbed at Harry's shoulders, making them hunch because his skin was prickling. "I promise you, I'll be here if you wake or sleep, cry or don't. I'll do anything for you right now, except let you go or leave."

Harry tried to curl in on himself, but he couldn't. He tried to prevent himself from being seen, and didn't think he could.

This is wrong. I can't have it. It's only a double-edged dream that'll slice us both open in the end...

And then he realized it didn't matter anyway, because frustrated, furious tears were already making their way down his face, and he'd shifted so that one of his arms was clutching at Draco with a death grip. Draco didn't wince, refused to wince, no matter how hard the pressure got.

"I hate this," Harry whispered. "I hate almost everything about this."

"I know," said Draco, and didn't say anything else.

Harry closed his eyes. I have to say this. He needs to know. "But I don't hate you," he said. "I can't."

Draco still didn't say anything. Harry felt another mixture of shame and guilt and self-loathing well up. How can I keep on taking from him like this? What can he possibly be getting out of this? We're not equals. I don't give him as much as I take. Shit. How can this possibly last?

“Stop that,” Draco whispered into his hair. “I can feel you feeling that, you know. And I want to be here, Harry. You’re giving me everything I want right now.”

Harry swallowed, and forced himself, slowly, to believe that that was true. It didn’t need to be true tomorrow, or for the rest of their lives. It might be true right now, and he didn’t really think Draco would lie to him.

Slowly, imperceptibly, he relaxed.

Maybe it’s not such a bad thing, being seen.

Interlude: Shall I Offer Thee Congratulations?

February 22nd, 1995

Potter:

I suppose you will want me to offer you congratulations. After all, you managed to uncover and destroy a Death Eater, and to prevent another from killing your brother on the same day.

I shall not offer you congratulations. There is no reason to. If you had paid attention to my warning, and if you had been wary of the man who called himself Moody from the beginning, none of this would have happened.

You will argue that you cannot trust me. What motive had I for warning you? You will want to know that, and say that nothing makes sense without it.

I have told you that motive. Of course I have. You just have chosen not to pay attention to me. I am bored, Potter, bored with all that my Lord and Bellatrix make me do, the useless missions they send me on, the useless curses they inflict on me which no longer hurt any more. You, at least, promise the interest of some excitement. You do things differently. I cannot always predict what will happen around you. You will be glad to know that my leg is intact, that the curse I caught at Lucius's home did not manage to sever it, but the fact that it happened is a source of intense joy and delight to me, because it is not something that my Lord or Bellatrix would have done. I cannot wait to see what wounds I might take the next time I fight against you.

You are an entertainment to me. You very much were at the Quidditch World Cup, which is why I gave you the warning about Mulciber. And then you chose to disregard it! I am disappointed in you, Potter. Keep this up, and you will not be interesting any more.

For now, though, you are still interesting, especially because Bellatrix clenches her teeth and wails about Mulciber never coming back, and worries that we are too few to continue our Lord's work. Why does

she worry? She must know that our Lord's work, this year, is not up to us.

I will give you another warning, because you amuse me so. See that you do not misuse this one.

Watch the sun, Potter, and fear it.

With all the regards of self-interest,

Evan Rosier.

Chapter Forty-Seven: The Bloody Bed

February 22nd, 1995

Severus:

Tell your young charge to take better care of himself. Really, letting him receive letters from Death Eaters? What kind of guardian are you? And yet, I have written him several times throughout the year, and no one has been able to prevent me from doing it. Then I used the Burning Heart Curse on him just outside Lucius Malfoy's house, and where were you? In jail, because you got yourself caught, like a bloody fool.

Watch out for him, Severus. Be sure that I am not the only one who considers him a fine toy, and who would like to play with him if they can get at him. Tell him to watch the moon. That is what my lord is waiting on. He will say the sun, I might even have said the sun in the letter that I wrote your ward, but it is the moon. Watch it from full to dark, from dark back to full again, and above all for the times when it might permit someone else access to the school.

After all, there was a werewolf on the grounds last year, was there not?

In memories of old fellowship,

Evan Rosier.

Harry looked up from Rosier's letter, and sighed. "So you don't believe that his letter to me—or even the mentions of the sun that Voldemort makes in my nightmares—holds any merit?"

"I believe that we will drive ourselves mad in trying to figure out what merit they might hold," said Snape flatly, his arms folded as he paced back and forth, his robes snapping behind him. Draco, sitting on the couch beside Harry, nudged him the moment Snape's back was turned, and Harry handed him the letter. Draco read it, frowning.

“Which is it, then?” he asked, looking up when he had finished. “The moon or the sun?”

“That is the point!” Snape snapped, spinning around. “It might be neither. It might be both. It might be one or the other, but we would fall dead from frustration before figuring it out. This is Evan. He was mad before Azkaban. He was always mad. And his favorite game has always been torturing those whom he wishes to play with mentally. Despite his love for curses that cause physical pain, he prefers seeing someone writhe in the torment of doubt and uncertainty. I watched him fill the heads of Muggle prisoners with so many false beliefs about magic that in the end they committed suicide or submitted in silence to the Killing Curse, unable to tell what was real and what was not.”

Harry hesitated, then decided he had to say something. “He did give me a true warning about Moody.”

“And you were wary of him.” Snape practically lunged towards his desk, looking through the drawers for something. Harry wasn’t surprised to recognize the blue vial of a Calming Potion when he held it up. Snape swallowed it, stood still for a few moments as it worked through his body, and then said, “Much good it did.”

Harry sighed. “That’s true. What would you suggest I do about it, then? I suppose it would do no good to reply to him—“

“Try it, and I will give you detention every night for a month,” said Snape, the calm monotone of his voice making the threat more effective.

Draco muttered something uncomplimentary, but Harry couldn’t decide if it was uncomplimentary towards himself or Snape, and decided not to push it. “All right. Are there any spells that will stop him from sending owls to me, then?”

“None that would not work to turn post owls away from you completely,” said Snape in disgust. “And especially, none that would not interfere with Hogwarts’ wards, probably at an unacceptable level of risk.”

Harry nodded in resignation. He could feel raw magic muttering in the school as the wards realigned themselves around both the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall. "What do we do, then?"

"We pretend that Evan Rosier does not exist." Snape took up both letters and cast them into his fireplace without pause. "For fourteen years, I believed him dead, and did very well without dwelling on him. Unless he presents himself to our notice again, we can do the same thing now."

He turned to face Harry. "Though I am curious to know if his comment about using the Burning Heart Curse on you holds any truth."

"Uh." Harry knew he had forgotten some things in the recitation he'd given to Snape of what happened during the two months he was in the Ministry, but there was so much; surely he was not expected to remember it all off the top of his head? The night he and Draco had dashed to Malfoy Manor was one of those things they hadn't mentioned yet. "Well, it's true that I had a vision that Voldemort was sending Rosier after Mr. Malfoy, because he wanted to know what had happened to the diary Mr. Malfoy retrieved in second year. We got there in time, but Rosier sent an owl with a letter charmed to act as a Portkey, and dragged Mr. Malfoy outside. I went after them, and he—Rosier, I mean—wound up casting the Burning Heart Curse on me."

"How did you heal from it?" Snape asked quietly.

"My father wouldn't have left him to suffer." Draco gave Snape a hard glance, and shoved his shoulder against Harry's.

"Mr. Malfoy rescued me," Harry agreed.

Snape stood in silence, thinking. Harry wondered if he would dispute Lucius's good intentions again, but he said only, "And did Rosier ask him about the diary?"

"Huh?" Harry knew it wasn't the most eloquent response, but then, this wasn't a question to which he'd ever given any thought.

“Did Rosier ask him about the diary?” Snape queried patiently. “At all?”

Harry swallowed. “I don’t know,” he said. “He could have done it during the moments before I joined their duel, I suppose. Or Mr. Malfoy just refused to tell him, and started firing curses. Does it matter?”

Snape waved a hand. “It might,” he said. “But with Evan Rosier, as I told you, it might just be another trap designed to lead us into a maze of guessing and counterguessing, which will waste our time.” He tilted his head and fixed a meditative glance on Draco. “You may wish to leave, Draco. Harry and I will be practicing dueling spells, and—“

“I want to stay.” Draco folded his arms.

“You are sure?” Snape drew his wand and banished the table in front of the couch, leaving the couch itself there only until Draco rose to his feet. As he cast protective charms in front of the bookshelves, he added, “You will feel the pain that Harry does when the curses get through to him.”

“I would feel that anyway,” Draco said, and gave Harry a sharp smile. “This way, I can get some training myself, and share a little more of his life.”

Harry rolled his eyes. There was no point in denying what Draco wanted to do. Harry hadn’t sensed any betrayal from him, and doubted he ever would. But that meant that, having let Draco see his weakness, there was no point in keeping him out of further situations where he might see it. He would trust Draco unless he encountered some indication that he could not.

As he and Snape backed away to opposite sides of the room, Harry wondered if he was naïve to think that Draco would never turn against him.

I don’t think so. Just realistic.

“This curse is one that Dolohov would have been the most likely to use against you, were he still alive,” said Snape, and shook his head. “Had not Rosier pretended to die, and impersonated him.” He lifted his wand. “But other Death Eaters will use it as well. The Shield Charm, and most other wards and shields, cannot block it. De Profundis!”

For a moment, Harry felt nothing in particular, and wondered if Snape had miscast the curse, or weakened it.

Then he heard a wind blow around the room, and saw the spells protecting Snape’s bookshelves buckle. At the same moment, wild, screaming Dark rage reared up in his mind, the same kind he had felt when he faced Lily, and the music rose and played in his ears. Harry closed his eyes, fighting hard to control it.

Beyond the rage, Snape explained calmly, “This curse drags your strongest emotions out of the depths of you, and forces you to combat them. It makes enemies go mad, or run away, or begin to pay attention to almost anything but the caster of the curse. You must face and fight it. Once you have conquered it, no one else can use it against you again.”

Harry’s consciousness of anything outside his own emotions vanished, then. He vaguely thought he could hear Draco screaming at Snape in the last moments, but he couldn’t understand the words. And then they, too, were gone, and he was left alone with the Dark.

The urge to smash, to destroy, to fly, to do anything that would express his hatred and his wildness...

This was part of him, and Harry knew that the longer and harder he tried to push it away, the more trouble he would have facing it if it ever broke free.

He had faced something of this power only once before, the night of the Chamber, when Sylarana’s death broke the barriers in his mind apart and loosed the silent self and the cold self. So Harry thought he could do worse than handle this rage by the same method with which he had handled them.

He began to build a new part of his mind for the rage to reside in. He made it beautiful, but sharp-edged, a glittering cage of blades. The Dark music rattled the icicles that hung from it like bells, and then, pleased, curled back around and rattled them again, listening to them chime. Harry made the cage as attractive as he could, before he moved inside it and cast an illusion of limitlessness there.

The image of open sky, of open plains, of open sea, all the boundless things stretching out of sight he had ever seen, went there. And the rage sensed it, and came bounding, eager to stretch itself out in a place where there were no constraints.

Harry shut the cage door after it, and then opened his eyes. Snape and Draco were both at the far end of the room, behind a strong ward. The bookshelves sagged against each other, and a few books had spilled from them, to lie open-faced or with pages pitifully trapped beneath them on the floor. Harry took a deep breath and climbed to his feet, wondering when he had fallen. He wiped at the mixture on his face, of rime from ice and tears from the wind and drool from his mouth.

“And there was a point to that, I suppose?” he murmured.

Snape lowered the ward and stepped towards him. “I mean to begin your training in earnest, Harry,” he said. “I will show you the various curses that the Death Eaters are likely to use against you, and how to defend against them. I will also show you applications of Light spells that they will not expect.” His eyes glinted, hard. “The war is beginning in earnest, and, as you have said, our enemies are not limited to your blood family and Dumbledore. Will you accept this?”

Harry nodded.

“I wish you would bloody well have warned me,” Draco muttered, massaging his skull. “I got an overdose of pain when Harry’s emotions went wild like that.”

Harry moved towards him in concern, but Snape got there before he could, looming over him and staring down.

“Mr. Malfoy.” His voice had gone icy. “Now that I know you have empathy, I can teach you attacks that will increase your advantages with it in battle and defenses that will decrease your disadvantage. But there is no place for whiners in this classroom, as in any other. You will become used to taking in pain, as a result of this gift-curse that you brought on yourself, or you will leave and not attend Harry’s training. Do you understand?”

“That you helped me bring on,” Draco said softly, his eyes glinting in the way that they did when Harry knew he wanted to hurt someone else.

“What does that mean?” Harry asked.

Snape turned with a swift flare of his robes and studied him. Then he said, “I was the one who gave Draco the book with the potion in it that, apparently, allowed him to summon Julia Malfoy.” He gave Draco a dark look. “Of course, if had researched more, he would have found someone else whose gifts were more compatible with his—a better ancestor to make a magical heir out of him.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Then you were the one who put a compulsion on him?”

Snape stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“Draco had a compulsion on him when I was helping him with the potion,” said Harry, taking a step forward. “One that drove him to complete the potion, and ignore nearly everything else while he was doing it. Did you know that that would happen?” He could feel rage unlike the caged Dark fury rising in him. Snape knew how he felt about compulsion. That he should have used it, and that he should have used it on Draco...

I like to think I’d feel just as upset about him using it on anyone. But that’s lying to myself again, which I’ve got to stop doing. I’m more upset about it being Draco than I would be about anyone else.

Snape slowly shook his head. "I knew the book would guide him to what he sought," he said. "I did not know about the compulsion."

"Have you ever used the book before?" Harry demanded.

Snape nodded. "Once, to brew a potion that allowed me to see my soul," he said quietly. "The book gave me the potion. However, I took my time preparing it. It did not drive me the way it appears to have driven Draco."

"So it was an accident," Harry whispered, wanting to believe, needing to believe, that his guardian had not really done something that stupid.

"It was," said Snape. "I can only surmise that Draco's desperate desire to be a magical heir must have interacted with the magic of the book, and that that prompted the compulsion." He paused for a long moment, then added delicately, "And, of course, the compulsion that your brother put on him last year, to protect you, has sunken into his mind and twined tight around it."

Harry shuddered. That means that—

"Sometimes, sir, you need to keep your mouth shut," said Draco, and scrambled across the room to stand in front of Harry. "I promise, Harry, that compulsion has nothing to do with the way I love you now. I manage to leave you alone when you want me to, don't I? And I wasn't protecting you when I made you go out to the Forbidden Forest and face the unicorns."

"Unicorns," said Snape flatly.

Harry swallowed, and then managed to smile. "I don't really believe all this is the result of a compulsion," he murmured. "I've been down that road before, and I was wrong then, too. Thank you, Draco, for making me see reason."

Draco grabbed his hand and held it as they both turned to face Snape. "I think we'll accomplish more if we're honest with each other," said Harry. "Completely. As long as you promise that you had no idea that that compulsion would come from the book, sir, then we can proceed,

and we'll tell you about the unicorns, and you can tell us about what else happened to you during your confinement."

Snape stared hard back at Harry, at the trust shining in the boy's eyes—trust with a reserve of wariness behind it.

Tell him that I know about the compulsion, and I do not think he will trust me again. He is not rational about compulsion, at all. That is the reason he ate Dumbledore's magic, because he compelled others.

He needs one adult he can trust right now. Totally. Completely. Speak the truth now, and I will shatter that trust more than a lie ever could. He will close up on me, and begin to treat me much as he treats Dumbledore. Lie to him, and if he finds out about it, he will be upset with me. But I believe that the moment when he finds out will be less dangerous than this one. He has suffered so many wounds in the last week. He needs my support more right now than he will again. When he has grown beyond this a bit, then I can think of telling him the truth.

Snape made his choice.

"I did not know that that would happen to Draco, no," he said quietly. "As I said, it did not happen to me with the potion that the book chose for me to brew."

That potion left me with no illusions. I know what I am. I am by no means pleasant, or nice, or without my contradictions.

But I am true to deeper loyalties, he thought, as he watched Harry's eyes brighten with his trust. I will give him what he needs most right now—support—and the truth later. The same way that, though it would cost me his trust and his love, if I thought that his parents were going to damage him through his hiding of his past, I would expose that past. I care more for his life than for his regard. I would break my promise before I would see him hurt because of it. I spied for the Light when others thought me a traitor and a Death Eater, and Harry matters more to me than that ever did or will.

"I knew that you wouldn't," said Harry. "I knew that you weren't that kind of person."

You know very little of me, Snape thought, but repeated, "Unicorns?"

"I freed the unicorns," Harry began.

"Because I made him go out to the Forbidden Forest and do it," Draco chipped in.

Harry gave him a disgusted glance, but went back and started telling the story from the beginning. Snape listened, and watched Harry's eyes grow brighter still, and the smug, possessive look on Draco's face.

This is love, then. Ah. Well. That explains a great deal.

I suppose I must also see to the protection of young Mr. Malfoy, since he is now necessary to making Harry happy. First guard and last defense, and it will probably turn both of them against me in the end. I am prepared to face that.

Someone banged on the door of his room hard enough to make Harry sit up straight, gasping. He glanced around the room, and caught a glimpse of light from Blaise's bed as he cast a Lumos charm. A moment later, Vince's voice called, "What the hell?"

"Harry has to come out now," said Millicent from beyond the door. She didn't sound as if she had slept at all. "He should be dressed and ready for a long journey."

"What's wrong with Millicent?" Draco said, sounding sulky, the way he always was when someone woke him up in the middle of the night. "Long journey? What—" He seemed to give up the sentence as a bad job, if the sound of his rolling over was any indication. "Can't it wait until morning?" he muttered.

"I don't think it can," said Harry, memory firing at last, and chasing away the last shreds of what could have been a vision of Voldemort, if it had had time to form. He rolled out of bed and hurried to his trunk, searching for a set of robes he could dump on. "I think Mrs.

Bulstrode's having her baby. She asked me to be there when she was born, and this would be nine months since she got pregnant, I think."

"Some of us are trying to sleep, Potter," Blaise said, and his Lumos charm went out, as if he could ignore what Harry had just said by sheer force of will.

"Harry?" Draco stuck his head through his curtains as Harry finished pulling on his robes, not bothering with the Slytherin tie. "Do you need someone to go with you?"

Harry shook his head quickly and yanked a hand through his hair, hoping that he looked at least somewhat presentable. "No offense, Draco, but you weren't invited," he said. "I don't think the Bulstrodes would want you there."

Draco sighed. "If you're sure—"

"Potter," Millicent said from beyond the door. Harry knew she only called him by his surname when she was angry at him.

"Sure," said Harry, smiled at him, and slipped from the room. Millicent caught his hand at once and started tugging him down the stairs. Harry frowned. He had seen she was clutching a small object in her hand, but he didn't know what it was.

"We're traveling by Portkey?" he asked. "Or Floo?"

"Neither. There are permanent wards on Blackstone insuring that no Portkeys work there," said Millicent, and then turned around and let him see what the object was. A small stone, veined with black, but mostly gray, it looked a bit like the device she'd used to take them to the site of the Walpurgis Night fire last year. Harry blinked.

"What is that, then?"

"Something that works like a Portkey, but isn't," said Millicent. She didn't explain, only grasped the stone and twisted the top, which

suddenly began to whirl. The air in front of Harry opened as a door would and swung back. Harry stared into the dark corridor beyond it.

“Walk!” Millicent gave him a violent push. Harry managed to save himself from stumbling on the threshold, and began to hurry down the hall. Locked doors passed him, silent and foreboding, with coats of arms on some of them that made him wonder if they led to the houses of other pureblood families. He had never heard of magic like this.

He turned to ask Millicent a question, but she pushed him up the hall again, one hand firm on his shoulder. The door behind them had closed, Harry noticed, and showed only an endless expanse of dark hall, identical to the one in front of them in every way.

“Go, Harry,” said Millicent. Harry blinked, noticing for the first time the shine of tears in her eyes. “Mother wanted you there. But she wasn’t the one who called me. It was Father, and he said—” Millicent closed her eyes and shook her head. “It’s bad. He said it’s bad.”

Harry sped up, though he wondered what the hell he could do to help Elfrida even if they got there in time. He knew nothing about childbirth or helping babies survive after it.

Does “bad” mean bad for Elfrida? Or Marian? Or both?

He and Millicent ran down the dark, silent hall, not even their footsteps raising much noise, until Millicent tugged him to a halt in front of a huge black door. The coat of arms wasn’t a formal design, only a dark silhouette of a castle. Millicent grasped the lock, and it sparkled and melted under her hand. The door swung open, and this time, Harry did stumble on the threshold as they came into a room bright with light and noise and the scent of blood.

“Millicent,” said Adalrico’s voice, sounding tense and exhausted. “And Potter. I am glad that you came before Elfrida passed.”

Harry shook off Millicent’s hand—easy enough, since she’d moved over to stand next to her father—and forced his eyes to focus on the sight in front of him. Elfrida lay on a bed absolutely soaked with blood.

A blanket discreetly covered her legs, but only partway, and Harry could make out that most of the blood must have come from her. Elfrida's pale hair was spread around her face, and she panted, eyes wide open. The air around her stirred uneasily with magic, powerful enough to raise the hair on his arms. Harry swallowed. This was the result of Elfrida's puellaris training; not using much magic during the course of daily life, she stored her power up until the moment she could wield it to benefit her children.

But the magic is strong enough to save her life, Harry thought in confusion, as he turned towards Adalrico. She's not in danger of dying. Or is the baby so badly off that they need the magic to feed to Marian?

The infant cradled in Adalrico's hands, though, and still slimed in blood, looked healthy enough. Her cord had been cut, and she was crying, face still squashed in on itself, her newborn magic jumping and pulsing around her in its inchoate efforts to soothe her. Harry forced himself to calm down, and look past the expressions of stony sorrow and desolation on Adalrico's and Millicent's faces, and get some answers.

"Why is Mrs. Bulstrode going to die?" he demanded.

"Because," said Adalrico softly, "she has felt that Marian could be her magical heir. Her suspicions grew as the pregnancy came to completion. But the sympathy between her and Marian is of a fleeting, limited kind, as such childish ties often are. Most magical heirs manifest later in life." Marian wailed, and Adalrico gently adjusted his position, rocking her back and forth. "Elfrida will have to pass her magic to Marian now if she is to make her her heir. And that means that she won't have enough left to keep herself alive."

Harry blinked, once, twice. "You—you really think magical heirs are that important?"

"Of course, Potter." Millicent snapped the words out without looking at him. Her eyes, and all her attention, were fixed on her tiny sister. "Blood is important, but magic is more so. It's extremely rare for a family to have two magical heirs in it, one for the father and one for

the mother. We're lucky." Harry thought he would have said that she didn't sound lucky, but he didn't dare speak a word at the moment. "No pureblood family—well, no Dark pureblood family, because the Light ones consider taking a magical heir barbaric, mostly, and stick to blood ones—would give up a chance like this. My mother will sacrifice her life so that Marian can be a more powerful witch." Millicent let out a shuddering breath. "I knew it might happen when Mother told me that she could sense sympathy between her magic and Marian's while she was still in the womb. That's rare. It's very rare."

Harry turned his head and met Elfrida's eyes. "And that is what you want, my lady?" he asked. The title was old, not in use anymore among the human denizens of the wizarding world, but he could not think of what else to call the woman in the bed, so very alive still, her magic soaring around her like a flight of dragons.

"I do wish I could stay alive to comfort my children," said Elfrida in a much stronger voice than Harry would have expected, given the pallor of her face. "It will be a hard thing for Marian never to know her mother. But the magic is more important. What makes us wizards and witches is our magic. Next to that, the shelter of blood is pale and comfortless." It sounded as if she were quoting some catechism, though not one Harry had ever heard.

"But you want to live," Harry clarified.

Elfrida gave a slow, languorous nod, and fixed her eyes on Adalrico's arms. "Bring her closer," she murmured. "I'll have to pass my magic to her from just a few feet away."

"Wait," Harry said, and Adalrico turned to look at him, though he also hurried Marian nearer the bed. "If Elfrida wants to live, then she should live."

"You cannot stop this, Potter," Adalrico said. "You might not understand it, but you gave an oath to be a witness to Marian's birth, and you are an ally of our family. You cannot interfere with the free choice of a woman of that family."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm honoring her choice," he snapped. "I'm going to make sure that she can pass her magic to Marian and still live." He stepped up on the left side of the bed and reached down, gripping Elfrida's arm. She rolled her head to look at him. The white pillow under her hair was stained dark with sweat.

"How can you do that?" she whispered. "You might be able to keep my life in my body, perhaps, but I would be a Squib or even a Muggle. I am a witch, Mr. Potter. I would rather die than live without magic."

"I don't intend that you have just your life," said Harry. "I need to know first of all if this connection will work. Mr. Bulstrode, I should have just as strong a connection to your wife as to you, shouldn't I? I don't need to touch your alliance scar to work with her?" He was prepared to bring Adalrico into the connection if he had to, but he would prefer it if he could do this without a fourth person. The link he was basing this on had used only three.

"Yes, you should be able to," said Adalrico, sounding bewildered. "Mr. Potter, what—"

"No time!" Elfrida whispered suddenly. "Put her on my arm, Adalrico, now." Her magic made her voice into a command just this side of compulsion, Harry thought. Her husband hastened to lay Marian on her arm and then step away.

Elfrida seemed to have forgotten about Harry. She smiled into her daughter's face, and murmured an incantation that Harry did not recognize, in a language he thought wasn't even Latin; it sang too much. A conduit snapped into place between her forehead and Marian's. The baby wailed all the louder. The magic swirling around Elfrida flowed towards the conduit, ready to pass on into the infant.

Harry took a deep breath, firmed his grip on Elfrida's arm, and waited. His body was in the bloody room, feeling Millicent's and Adalrico's tense, worried gazes, but his mind was back in the Chamber of Secrets, remembering the trap that Tom Riddle had sprung on him, using the links between Harry and Connor and himself to come to life. He had hurt Connor, which hurt Harry thanks to their twin bond, and pulled Harry's magic out through the scar his older self had caused.

Elfrida was feeding Marian her magic, and Harry thought his own connections to the Bulstrodes, mother and newborn daughter as well as father and older sister, should work for the other two sides of the circle. Otherwise, he would be pulling power from Marian when he acted. But because he had a connection with Marian and Elfrida based on trust and alliance, not pain and hatred, and he did not want to drain Marian to save her mother's life, this should work the way he wanted it to.

He hoped.

Elfrida slumped a bit, and Harry knew that she was getting closer to empty. The magic would leave her, and she would perish, perhaps as much out of desire not to live magicless as because she would not have the strength to keep herself from bleeding to death.

Now.

Harry reached down inside himself and began to pull power from his immense store, reversing the process that allowed him to eat magic from people like Dumbledore and Voldemort.

This time, it was rather like milking a snake of its venom, rather than swallowing power with a snake. The creature gurgled lazily and filled his working hands with magic, which pooled down Harry's fingers and into Elfrida's arm. She made a soft, questioning sound, but didn't look away from her daughter. The conduit between their foreheads shone like a strand of solid diamond now, illuminated from without and within.

Harry drained his magic, careful to feed Elfrida only benevolent or neutral power; he would not want to see what untamed Dark magic might do so near Marian. It was easier than he had thought it would be. His magic unfolded in layer after layer, and he could pick through the layers, choose what he wanted, and siphon it down the link created by their formal alliance. Elfrida's breathing grew louder, and Harry felt her muscles gaining strength and consistency again, her body surging as it replenished her blood.

For one sudden, wild, beautiful moment, he felt as if he were her, looking out through her eyes, breathing with her lungs, feeling her heart beat with aching familiarity. He could feel her love for Marian, and for Millicent, and for Adalrico—still present and there, that last emotion, but a distant thing compared to her fierce protective love for her children. Harry had never experienced anything like it. The closest things were the sensations he had shared when gazing out through the Hungarian Horntail's eyes.

He had been afraid for a time that Elfrida's body would reject his own magic as unfamiliar, but the moment it settled deeply into her muscles and veins, they changed it to suit themselves. She would be a different kind of witch than before, Harry could see that. But as he watched glinting trails of white power changed to a softer gray and snatched into place, cradling her and soothing her and conjuring her softly back to life, he did not think the difference would be that noticeable.

Abruptly, someone broke the link, jerking his hand from Elfrida's arm. Harry blinked, and looked up. Adalrico was holding his wrist, and staring at him as though he were an intruder, an enemy—

Or something unbelievably strange.

"She will live," he whispered.

Harry glanced over at Elfrida, and his heart jumped for a moment as he saw that her eyes were shut. Then he realized she was breathing regularly, stirring the sheet that covered her with deep, healthy pants. Little Marian was fast asleep on her mother's arm, the conduit between their heads faded. She did have some sort of marking on her brow, Harry saw dazedly. He thought it was star-shaped.

"What did you do?" Adalrico whispered. "Were you actually—were you actually giving Elfrida magic that would save her life?"

Harry nodded at him. "Of course."

"But that would mean sacrificing your power." Adalrico said it as he might speak of the rape of a child.

Harry smiled tiredly at him and sent his wandless magic traveling around the inside of his skin. "I still have plenty. I'm not noticeably weaker. I promise you, I wouldn't have killed myself trying to save her. I wouldn't have done this at all if I wasn't sure that both of us would live."

"But that you would do it at all..." Adalrico trailed off and shook his head. He was profoundly pale.

"People matter more to me than magic," said Harry, wondering why it shocked the man so. Surely he should know it, after allying with me? He moved around the bed and bent over to look into Marian's face. She looked slightly less like a red, squashed monkey now, and more like a normal baby. The marking on her forehead was blue and, indeed, faintly star-shaped. Harry gently stroked her blood-soaked, naked head. "Hello, little one," he whispered. "Welcome to the world. I hope that your scar brings you more joy than mine has brought me."

He felt Millicent's hand on his shoulder. "Let me take her, Harry," she said.

Harry nodded, and stepped out of the way so Millicent could pick the baby up. Marian didn't even wake as her sister took her over to a basin of water standing ready in the corner and began to wash her free of blood and birthing fluid.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry blinked at Adalrico.

"You have done a great thing for us this night," Adalrico said, "and we cannot pay the debt we owe you."

"There is no debt," said Harry, and yawned. He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I just—" The words got lost in another yawn.

"We understand," said Adalrico, and steered him to a divan in the corner. "Rest. Millicent will take you back to Hogwarts in the morning."

Harry nodded at him, and then lay down on the divan and closed his eyes. In seconds, he had lost the soft splashing of water and the murmurs of Millicent talking to her new sister to darkness.

Millicent gently wrapped Marian up in a loose white cloth they'd had lying ready and carried her back to rest on Elfrida's chest. House elves had already come, tidied the bed, clothed her mother in a clean gown—without disturbing or waking her—and piled new pillows behind her head. Millicent touched her mother and her sister both on the cheek, and then stepped away. Her father looked up from staring at Harry. He'd put a blanket over him.

“Why?” he asked.

Millicent understood the question behind the question. She moved over to join her father in watching Harry for a few moments before she answered, though. Harry's face was neutral in sleep, not entirely relaxed and not entirely innocent—just ordinary. He slept like someone who had no idea at all what he'd done.

He didn't, Millicent knew. He hadn't been raised in a Dark pureblood family, where three kinds of pride were strong: that of tradition, that of blood, and that of magic. He didn't realize what one of their families would go through to have magical heirs and not just ordinary blood ones, children who could share their parents' powers and not just the descent that was the heritage of every child, those of Muggles and Mudbloods as well as purebloods. Millicent had been preparing since the new year, when her parents told her that Marian might well be Elfrida's magical heir, to lose her mother. Of course she would sacrifice her powers to give her daughter a chance at carrying them and being a strong witch, and of course she would not want to live as a weak shell afterwards. If the transfer of magic itself did not kill her, she would have committed suicide.

And now Harry had come along, with his magic that any Dark pureblood would have killed and tortured dozens of people to wield and that any Dark pureblood family would have lost half its members to claim for one of their children, and given part of it to Elfrida, easily, without hesitation, not even seeming to know that it was a sacrifice.

It was so easy that it would have been an insult, if what Harry said had not been true, Millicent thought. He cared more about people than about magic. He saw a chance to save her mother's life, and, more, to insure that she still lived as a witch, and he took it.

To him, it was just the right thing to do; he had the capability and opportunity to do it, so he did. He didn't seem aware that he'd just tied the Bulstrodes to him with bonds stronger than steel.

"Millicent."

Millicent glanced up. Her father rested one hand on her shoulder and drew her near him, as he always did when he was about to say something particularly important.

"It doesn't matter if he never Declares for the Dark," her father whispered. "We cannot lose him. He will be more than just another Lord to follow, or someone to reclaim the wizarding world for the Dark in our generation. Stand firm in your guardianship over him. If it comes to it, you may use any and all of our gifts to rescue him or help him continue to live. I give you formal permission."

Millicent blinked rapidly, then smiled. The Bulstrodes, like most Dark pureblood families, had several gifts that supposedly ran from magical heir to magical heir. They kept them secret as a matter of course, and none of their enemies, or even most of their allies, would ever be quite sure which heir could do what.

Millicent had manifested as Adalrico's heir when she was six, and was able to do everything that he could do. He trusted her absolutely, but he had never given her leave to use any of the gifts outside Blackstone before.

"I promise, Father," she said.

Adalrico kissed her on the forehead and went to sit with his wife and newest child. Millicent sat down beside the divan to watch Harry. She knew that she couldn't have slept that night, even if she wanted to.

You don't even realize that what you did was unusual, she thought, in mingled exasperation and fondness for the boy on the couch. And that's one of the reasons, though far from the only one, that we'll lay down our lives for you.

Whether you want us to or not. You've got yourself allies, Harry Potter, and we don't intend to let you go.

Chapter Forty-Eight: Irrevocably Changed

"Your magic feels less powerful," was the first thing Draco announced the next morning.

Harry dropped his spoon into his porridge, and hissed at Draco around a mouthful of it. Several of the Slytherins had turned to look at them: Blaise with that bemused look he affected since Harry had learned Draco was in love with him, Millicent with smug satisfaction, Pansy with a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, and Montague with the sullenness he showed towards anyone who wasn't Pansy.

"It is not!" Harry hissed, when he'd finally managed to swallow. "I gave up part of the magic I took from the Headmaster. Nothing else." He started eating again, to show how little stock he put in Draco's ridiculous suppositions.

"But it feels less powerful," Draco persisted, with that special emphasis he usually only gave to judgments in which his empathy was involved somehow.

Harry gave him a dark look. "I know that your gift doesn't let you sense that," he whispered.

Draco shrugged at him. "You've nearly intoxicated me since you took the magic from Dumbledore," he said. "And now I can think with a bit of a clearer head. That's all I'm saying."

"Thank Merlin for that," Millicent muttered. "Does that mean that we'll get a bit fewer of the lovelorn looks and sighs and mutters about 'Harry darling?'"

Draco's face turned nearly the color of a ripe apple. "I have never called Harry that," he said.

"Yes, you have," said Blaise helpfully. "Usually in dreams, that's true, and not when you're awake, but you have. At least you don't have to share a room with him," he added to Millicent. "Bloody disgusting, it is."

"I do not!" Draco howled.

Harry winked at Millicent, thanking her for distracting Draco from the subject he'd been trying to talk about. Unfortunately for him, Draco caught the wink, and pinned him with a deadly glare.

"You're sure that you only gave up the magic that you took from Dumbledore?" he asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm sure. Besides, I don't see why everyone thinks it's such a large sacrifice. The magic is doing Millicent's mother more good than it ever was just sitting around inside me. And I can siphon off Dumbledore, or someone else, again if I ever want more." He was beginning to realize that that was a large part of the reason Dumbledore feared him. Harry could take magic from another person, and in that case, the other wizard or witch was permanently weakened. Harry truly could have drained Dumbledore down into a Squib or worse if he wished.

Just like Lily warned me I could, right before she tried to cast the phoenix web on me again.

Harry shook his head, and set the memories aside. They wouldn't do him any good, and he wasn't about to start casually draining other people. Besides, Draco had gone back to the interrogation.

"Millicent's mother?"

Millicent wore a broad smile. "Harry saved my mother's life last night," she announced. "My little sister Marian is my mother's magical heir, but you know what it means when a baby is a magical heir: the sympathy between child and parent doesn't last that long, and there's almost no chance of her regaining the sympathy later in life." Heads nodded around the Slytherin table. "Mother gave her magic to Marian, and Harry gave some of his magic to my mother, so that she could continue living." She bit into her toast and didn't look up as whispers ran around the table.

Harry rolled his eyes when awed and shocked and disbelieving glances came his way. Why the hell is this such a big deal? Wouldn't most people take the chance to save a life if they could? I'm just lucky that I have the power to do something about it when the chance comes up.

"Why did you choose Dumbledore's power to give up?" Draco whispered to him.

Harry shrugged. "It was nearest the surface, and it was Light, so it wouldn't hurt Mrs. Bulstrode or Marian."

Draco nodded, then joined the staring. Harry shrugged once more and started eating his porridge. He'd become better at dealing with stares in the days since the Second Task, when it became clear that they wouldn't stop any time soon. Harry thought they would have to stop at some point, though. The Daily Prophet would start carrying stories that people thought more interesting. People would start realizing that killing someone was not something they should honor him for.

I may be living in a mad world at the moment, but it will steady itself.
"Mr. Potter. A word with you, please?"

Harry wasn't surprised that Draco stayed at his side as he turned around. After all, he'd hardly had good things happen to him when he was alone with Defense Against the Dark Arts professors in the past, except for Remus.

Karkaroff, who'd taken over the Defense classes gradually during the last week, stood surveying him expectantly for a moment, as though he already thought Harry should know what he wanted to talk about. His fingers played with his left sleeve. Harry didn't have to see the arm to know what rested there: the Dark Mark. Karkaroff had been a Death Eater.

I seem to be surrounded by them.

"I wanted to reassure you," Karkaroff blurted suddenly, "that I'm not going to do the same things Mulciber did."

Harry couldn't help snorting as he raised his eyes to the professor's face. "I should hope not, sir," he said. "One Death Eater cursing the professors and opening holes in the wards is enough."

Karkaroff flinched, then nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes, that's it exactly," he whispered. "I—I would not do anything like that. I repented of being a Death Eater in the end, which is why I've been Headmaster of Durmstrang and not in Azkaban or Obscuratio, the German prison. I know that you have no reason to believe me, but—"

"I believe you because you're free," Harry interrupted him. "You would hardly go running back to Voldemort now, I think."

Karkaroff flinched again, though this time Harry knew it was from the pronunciation of the Dark Lord's name. "Yes," he whispered. "I—but it is more than that. I want it to be more than that." He paused, visibly gathering his courage. Harry studied him, and wondered that he'd never noticed the man's fear before. He had always seemed large and blustering, and he was a competent, if monotonous, teacher who betrayed little of his emotions in his class. Of course, Harry hadn't had any reason to pay him much attention before this. "I want you to know that you can trust me as more than just someone who ran because he was frightened."

"Liar," said Draco, so quietly that Harry didn't think Karkaroff heard. He looked at Draco, but he just shook his head, so Harry resigned himself to waiting for the explanation.

"I want—I want to become something more than that," said Karkaroff, and gave a gusty sigh. Harry wrinkled his nose. Has he been drinking? Smoking? His breath smells foul. "I want to become part of the fight against my Lord, if he—if he returns." He swallowed, and his voice cracked on the words. "Do you understand?" He was obviously appealing to Harry now, eyes wide. "A true fighter, not a neutral. I want you to know that you don't have to distrust me just because I bear the Dark Mark."

Harry studied him in silence for a moment. He could grasp what Karkaroff was saying, though the man's trembling nervousness made Harry wonder how much his promise would really hold up in battle. At least Peter, who'd also been a Death Eater with a cowardly reputation, had proven to be much stronger than Harry had thought he was.

More than that, though, he wondered something else.

"Why aren't you telling this to Headmaster Dumbledore, sir?" he asked. "Or Professor McGonagall? They're the ones who are in charge of strategy and planning for the War. They're the ones who fought in the first war against Voldemort. They're the ones you'd need to convince."

Karkaroff gave a hysterical little laugh. "They are not the ones who killed one of my former comrades," he said, his accent becoming steadily thicker. "And they are not one of the two wizards setting Dark magic on fire across Europe right now."

Harry swallowed, slowly. He had not realized that the Dark singing he'd heard under the lake could be heard by other people.

So Voldemort is one...and I am the other.

"You think that you need to convince me," he said, and Karkaroff nodded at once.

"I am a coward," he said, voice marginally calmer. "I admit that. I tried to trade the names of other—of Death Eaters for my freedom. I admit that. But I want to change things, now that I know it is not just bad dreams that my Lord is returned. I want to fight at your side. But, to do that, I know that you might distrust me at first, so I must soothe your distrust."

Harry sighed. He didn't think that anything would actually test Karkaroff as much as the stress of battle, and he had no idea how long it might be before he and Voldemort actually clashed in open war.

"I'll keep it in mind," he said, unsure of whether he would have thought of Karkaroff at all if the man hadn't pressed his presence into Harry's mind. "Thank you for telling me."

Karkaroff nodded at him, and then turned away to spell the board clean for the next class. Harry walked out the door, frowning and wondering what was stranger: that Karkaroff should have approached him at all, or that there might be people out there beyond Britain watching his every move. To have his actions tested on the stage of Hogwarts, or Britain, was frightening enough.

"He's a liar," Draco whispered.

"You said that," Harry murmured, recalled to himself. "About which part?"

"He did run because he was frightened," said Draco. "He ran from several battles, including one that happened not long before the night you brought down—You-Know-Who." Harry hissed at him to keep his voice down, and Draco paused to roll his eyes at him. "You know that people will have to find out about you being the Boy-Who-Lived someday, Harry. My parents already know," he added, as if that were supposed to help.

"Your parents are special cases. Now, tell me more about Karkaroff."

"He was captured crouching in a dark hole and shaking in his boots," said Draco. "And soaked in piss, apparently. And that wasn't the first time. He was actually captured by the Aurors once before his trial, but they let him go because they couldn't believe how pitiful he was. He's a wet rag, and though you might get some good use out of him if you twist him, you'll mostly get water."

Harry shrugged and worked his way over to the wall so that a couple Ravenclaw sixth-years could pass. They sneered at him, but there was fear behind their eyes. Without much surprise, Harry recognized Gorgon and Jones, the bullies who used to torment Luna. "I don't know if I'll make much use of him at all, but thank you. I'll keep it in mind."

“Hey, Potter!”

Harry looked slowly over his shoulder. Gorgon was standing slightly apart from Jones, his wand in his hand. Harry remembered the duel they’d had earlier that year over the Hound with the surname of Gorgon, and braced his legs.

Gorgon didn’t attack, though. He just sneered again, and said, “I suppose that you think you’re all high and mighty now, bullying the Headmaster.”

Harry winced. Skeeter’s articles, if no one else’s, had played that angle up. “I didn’t bully the Headmaster,” he said. “He was compelling people. I just wanted him to stop, and he did when I showed him I was serious.”

Gorgon came a step forward. “And now what? What are you going to do for an encore? Drain more people?” He waved one hand in front of himself as Jones laughed. “Here’s my magic. Come and take it, if you think you can defeat me.”

Harry looked past the mocking words, studying Gorgon’s face. It was convulsed with laughter, but the laughter had a desperate edge to it.

He’s afraid. I’m not surprised. If I can feed on anyone’s magic, why would they think I’d limit myself to Dumbledore?

That just made Harry weary. He shook his head. “I don’t have a reason to, Gorgon,” he said.

“You’re giving him a reason, you fool.”

Harry jumped slightly, and then recognized Cho standing behind Gorgon with her hands on her hips. Jones was gaping at her. Gorgon turned around and sneered at her in turn.

“What do you know? You’ve read the articles. What makes you think that we won’t be his next—“

"Because he only does that when he's angry," Cho said. "Really angry." She looked at Harry. "Isn't that right, Harry?"

Harry nodded slowly, trying to work out why she was defending him.

"There," said Cho, to Gorgon. "I trust Harry. I don't have any reason not to trust him. He saved my life." She flicked her head, tossing her long dark hair over her shoulder. "And until I see him drain someone he's not angry at, then I won't consider him a danger to me." She smiled at Harry. "Is the lesson that you're teaching still scheduled for tonight after dinner, Harry?"

"Um, yes," said Harry, and heard Draco give a possessive little growl beside him that was probably inspired by Cho's smile.

"Good," said Cho. "Cedric and I will be there, and I'll drag Marietta away from her books if I have to. She's not going to learn any more Charms that way. They're already overflowing from her ears as it is." She smiled once more at Harry, and then turned and strode up the hall. Gorgon and Jones stood there and looked like fools in her wake.

Harry tugged on Draco's arm and got him walking again. He still looked murderous.

"She has a boyfriend," Harry whispered. "She and Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff, went to the Yule Ball together, and they're officially dating now. Relax."

"She just looks at you too intently," Draco whispered back. "They always look at you too intently, Harry."

Harry couldn't help chuckling, even if the sound was sharp and bitten-off. "Welcome to my entire life at the moment, Draco."

Draco tugged on his arm, stopping him. Harry turned and waited patiently as Draco studied him. Harry's skin still crawled when he did that, but he was learning to get used to it. Draco saw things about him that no one else would, things that Harry allowed him to see, and so it was silly to object to these moments of silent scrutiny.

"It really bothers you, doesn't it?" Draco said at last. "Not just when someone makes baseless accusations at you, like Gorgon and Jones, but when someone calls attention to you in any way."

"Yes," said Harry. "And now, come on. We're going to be late for dinner if we don't hurry."

He tugged at Draco's hand, but Draco held him still. "I'll try not to do that anymore, then," he whispered. "Now that I really know." He gave Harry a quick hug and pulled away. "Sorry for this morning."

It took Harry a moment to work out that he was talking about calling the Slytherin table's attention to Harry's diminished magic. "You don't need to apologize," he said. "Really, Draco."

"Hush, I want to," Draco responded, and got him moving again. Harry eyed him sideways, and then shook his head.

Sometimes, Draco Malfoy, you are very strange.
Dinner was never a quiet affair for Harry anymore, because of the post owls.

There had been the streams of Howlers after Skeeter's article and the others about the Triwizard Tournament came out: some of them scolding him for taking the spotlight from the true Champions, believing he was really Connor's jealous younger brother, but most of them upset that Harry had dared to go against the Headmaster. Harry had listened to them and hadn't flinched, not really. It was no more than he expected. Dumbledore's reputation was still too bright in most of the wizarding world for Harry to destroy him without darkening his own.

Unless you used the accusations of child abuse...

Harry swallowed and put the thought away. If he had his way, no one would ever learn about that who didn't already know. Ever.

There had been the letters congratulating him for defeating Death Eaters or rescuing Moody or standing up for his beliefs, gushing,

praising things that Harry pushed aside and buried his head in his arms over when Millicent or Pansy read them aloud in high, girlish voices. Harry couldn't understand why people wrote the damn things. At least the Howlers were understandable, if embarrassing. These...these people didn't know him, and sometimes they asked for incomprehensible things, like for him to write back and tell them how he became so wise. Harry so far hadn't answered a single letter. The mere thought of doing so set shame burning on his cheeks, because there was no way that he could give them what they wanted. What they wanted was impossible. They'd created some illusion who didn't exist.

Draco carefully gathered all those letters and put them away. Harry refused to ask what he did with them.

But dinner tonight was different, and actually useful, because Harry received three letters he'd been waiting for. The first came on the leg of a gray owl that Harry had already learned to recognize as one of St. Mungo's preferred messengers. He extended bits of his pudding to the owl in thanks while he read the letter.

March 1st, 1995

Dear Mr. Potter:

As you requested, we have begun tests on the patients we believed to have been tortured into insanity by the Cruciatus or other similar curses during the first war with You-Know-Who. We have discovered anomalies in the minds of several. As Mulciber was an Imperius Curse specialist, we believe that he may have adapted and modified the spell to outlast not just his death, but the passage of time and most efforts to relieve the spell with Finite Incantatem.

We have, however, managed to heal two witches who were victims of Mulciber's last recorded attack before his capture by the Aurors in late 1981. We believe that their lesser length of time spent under the spell has something to do with our success, but we eventually hope to apply the technique to the minds of other sufferers. A Finite Incantatem cast cooperatively, through the means of a Light ritual, provided the means we sought.

I am grateful beyond words for your suggestion to us that we look into the minds of some of Mulciber's victims. While some are indeed insane, that others might come back to themselves is a gift.

Sincerely,

Miriam Strout

Head Healer

Janus Thickey Ward.

Harry couldn't help smiling as he ruffled the owl's feathers one more time and borrowed a sheet of parchment from Pansy to scribble an enthusiastic reply to Healer Strout. The owl took wing the moment he finished binding the letter, as if eager to be away from the table. Of course, Harry considered, that might have something to do with the large, elegant black bird bearing towards him.

This owl landed and refused to take any refreshment, eying Harry haughtily as she extended her leg. Harry knew better than to pet her feathers, either. This was Narcissa's new owl, Regina, and she had made it quite clear that she only tolerated delivering messages to Hogwarts. Nor did she like the food, the company of other owls, people touching her, people remarking on her, or people asking her if a reply was expected. She would wait for a reply if she was expected to take one, and spent most of her time twisting her head around and glaring at every other student at the Slytherin table with large orange eyes. She did not look at Harry himself, as if he were beneath her contempt.

Harry unfolded the letter curiously; he had a notion why Narcissa might be writing to him, but he had hardly expected any new news on this front.

Dear Harry:

I wish to know if you have any time free this weekend. I have been to most of the easily accessible Black houses by now, and the wards

have permitted me free passage into all of them. I believe that Regulus may be somewhere nearby, self-aware enough to have recognized me and lowered the wards of his own free will. Our best chance for finding his body is, I believe, Wayhouse, a small place used as a private summer home by my cousin Arcturus Black in the early part of this century. I have found signs of Regulus's presence there, though I have not been able to sense the presence of any human flesh or blood.

Please write back. The tapestry in Grimmauld Place reassures me that Regulus is still alive, and he may yet need our help.

Yours in grace,

Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry didn't need to write a long reply to this one, either, only a formal statement of his consent, and Regina hopped off and into the air with it inside a minute. The offended wriggle of her tail showed that she thought the reading and reply had taken rather too long for her delicate sensibilities.

The third letter didn't ride with an owl, but with a gyrfalcon. She landed right beside Harry's plate and commenced to eat half his pudding before he could remove the letter from her leg. He paused when he saw the formal crest on it: rising sun and stars.

Salutations, Mr. Potter.

I suppose that you think it has taken me a very great time to get back to you, especially as I spoke of contacting your Dark allies at Christmas. However, I did not wish to write to you again until I had a substantial victory to report, and here it is: Dolores Umbridge is on the verge of losing her position as the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

No Dark spells were used. None were needed. I merely made sure to expose Madam Umbridge's insufficiencies in the right places and to the right people, and even her allies began to abandon her in disgust.

I anticipate having her out of the Ministry in no more than two months at the most. They may shuffle her to another position first, but she no longer has any substantial power.

Now, on to the meat of this letter, which I promised you when first we met in the Forbidden Forest. I, Tybalt Starrise, elder son of Alba Starrise and Tiberius Griffinsnest, joined partner of John Smythe-Blyton, plight my loyalty and my faith to you, in Merlin's name, under the Light, unto the Light unending.

I should warn you that you must not expect the allegiance of the rest of my family to come with me. My brother Pharos is our uncle's heir, and is wary of doing anything that might upset him. At the moment, pledging allegiance or help to someone who is in any way a Dark wizard would upset him.

My uncle...Augustus Starrise hates what he cannot control. That includes me, and it is the reason that he accepted Pharos as heir. He is barred from participation in politics until this October. Then I fear that he will make trouble for you again, unless I can bring him around in the meantime. I will try, but I am not sure if I can manage to do so. Most of our so-called discussions wind up as shouting matches.

I want from you, Lord-who-will-not-be-called-so, assurance that the assistance of Light wizards does not disgust you, and that you will not require us to give up our principles if we fight beside you. I am not and never can be of the Dark.

You may think that you had fooled me completely that day in the Forest, but you did not. I went along with you, Harry Potter, out of curiosity, agreement with you about the disgusting nature of people like Madam Umbridge, and eagerness to see what would happen next. I see with clear eyes, and so does my John, and both of us are waiting to see what you will do next.

Yours under the Light,

Tybalt Starrise.

Harry raised his eyebrows when he was done, and wrote a slightly longer reply this time, though he had to shove the greedy gyrfalcon's head aside to do so.

Dear Mr. Starrise:

I will not require you to give up your principles if you fight beside me. Nor am I disgusted with Light wizards, though between Headmaster Dumbledore and wizards like the former Minister, I have known little good from them. If you pledge me loyalty and allegiance, I will do the same for you.

I am sorry to hear about your uncle, and am hesitant to cause any family quarrels. Will it damage you irreparably in his eyes to hear that you have written me, fought beside me, promised me your help? If the answer to any of those questions is yes, I will understand if you break off this alliance.

I am gratified to hear that you were not taken in by my manipulations. One always wants one's allies to be intelligent.

I am at your disposal for the answering of questions.

Yours sincerely,

Harry Potter.

Harry signed with a flourish, bound the letter to the gyrfalcon's leg, and forcefully pushed her away from his plate. She gave him a hurt look and bounded aloft. Heads craned back to watch her go, then turned to look at Harry.

Harry was glad enough to stand, clear his throat, and hurry on to the lesson he had promised to give for students of all the Houses after dinner.

"Harry!"

Harry had been concentrating on ignoring the stares as he walked with Draco to the abandoned classroom designated for that evening's

lesson, but he turned around at this voice. "Connor!" he said, and felt a smile sweep his face of the kind he hadn't given since his brother took the Slicing Curse. "Finally out of the hospital wing?"

"Yes." Connor winced slightly as he walked towards Harry, but he was walking again, and his gaze was free of the delirium that had overtaken him for nearly a week when the Slicing Curse, the Imperius Curse, and the healing potions that Madam Pomfrey had given him had reacted together. "And ready to attend this lesson tonight." He cocked his head stubbornly at Harry.

"We're not going to be doing any spells," said Harry. He didn't want to do something active that Connor couldn't participate in because of his wounds. "Just pureblood history tonight."

Connor uttered a long-suffering sigh. "If I must."

"You're damn lucky to be able to sit in on it at all, Potter," Draco said, voice low and vicious. "Most people who have as much knowledge as Harry does don't just spread it around to all and sundry."

Harry rolled his eyes at Draco, especially when he saw Connor struggling to maintain, and then maintaining, his calm. "Don't mind him, please," he told Connor. "He's just pissy when he thinks someone else is getting more than his fair share of my attention."

"I am not," Draco began.

"Yes, you are," said Connor, relaxed again, and giving a smile that was dangerously near a smirk. "Harry told me that you declared your love for him. Congratulations. I told him you would be mad not to be in love with him by now." He paused significantly. "Of course, you should still be careful, Malfoy. With all the foot-stomping and face-flushing go on right now, someone might think you're acting a bit like a girl."

Draco drew his wand. Connor grinned and reached for his.

"Stop it, the both of you," said Harry, not looking forward to being trapped in a small room with them for the next few hours. "Connor,

stop teasing Draco. Draco, stop acting as though Connor is going to do something to hurt me at any moment. He's my brother, of course he's going to tease us about this." He rolled his eyes and moved on down the hall, feeling like a parent scolding two unruly children.

"Harry," Draco said softly, catching up with him, "he really hurt you last year."

"And I've forgiven him for it," said Harry. "And other people for worse things." He didn't have to speak Lucius's name for Draco to know it was hanging there in the air between them. "So leave off, all right?"

Draco nodded, subdued, and stepped into the room beside him. A good number of students were already there, Harry saw, including some who hadn't come the other times. Millicent sat in one of the front desks, swinging her legs, her gaze calm and inquisitive. Blaise lounged in a chair in the second row, with one arm around Ginny Weasley, who seemed caught between enjoyment at his actions and annoyance at the way Blaise was eyeing Ron—or maybe at the way Ron was watching them, Harry didn't know. A few Durmstrang students sat beside Blaise, their expressions cautious. Hermione and Zacharias were in the third row, where they usually sat, but arguing in low, furious voices. Cho grinned and waved from the back of the room, where Cedric was massaging her shoulders.

"History lesson tonight," Harry announced, and ignored the chorus of groans that resulted. "Anyone who doesn't like that is welcome to leave."

No one did. Luna did say from the back of the room, though, her voice soft and sweet, "Are you going to tell us the story of Rowena and Salazar?"

Harry smiled at her, and ignored Draco's exasperated sound. Some things, Draco was just going to have to get used to. Harry knew of no other way of soothing his jealousy than by actions like letting Draco touch him where no one else was allowed. Words certainly didn't work. "I don't know that story well enough to tell it, Luna."

“Too bad,” said Luna, sounding dreamy. “It is a very pretty story. They had words about Muggleborns, but Rowena also put a blanket over Salazar one night when he had fallen asleep from studying too hard, and he did the same for her. The chairs remember.”

The rest of the room seemed to want to fall into an embarrassed silence after that, but Harry started talking instead. “I’m going to tell a story that I do know, though I suppose you might call it a legend and not history. How many of you know what happened to divide Light and Dark wizards in Merlin’s time?”

A few foreheads wrinkled, and one or two hands rose, wavering, and dropped. Harry nodded. He had suspected that most people would know stories much nearer to them in history—taking the feud as coming from Gryffindor’s and Slytherin’s struggles, for example, or from the Declaration of the first truly historical Dark Lord not long before the founding of Hogwarts.

“I read about this in a book that my godfather fetched for me out of his private collection.” He didn’t say Sirius’s name. It was still hard to do so, and he wanted a storytelling voice, not one wavering and cracking with emotion. “Merlin was a force for unity among wizardkind, the most powerful Lord that anyone had ever seen—or ever has, really. He himself knew and used both Light and Dark magic, and he was probably the one who established some of the definitions of them. For that, wizards and witches honored him.

“He had two children—though the legend didn’t say if they were adopted children, or relatives of his, or actual daughters, or just witches whom he knew and cherished. He thought that he would teach both of them all his knowledge, so that they could be the leaders among wizards and witches when he at last passed. But while he did so, the two sisters were convinced that he had not done so. Partly that was Merlin’s fault, since he was a Seer of the future and couldn’t tell them the truth about things like prophecies, which made them believe he was always keeping secrets. But partly that was the sisters’ fault, because they let the promised position of leadership go to their heads, and they wanted more and more, knowledge of spells that didn’t exist and gifts that Merlin didn’t possess and control of magical creatures that weren’t theirs to bind.”

Harry felt his voice waver on that last, in spite of himself. It made him far angrier than it had the first time he read the story.

He paused to study the faces of his audience. Hermione's voice had grown a little louder, but otherwise, everyone was absorbed in the tale. Someone muttered something about this being loads better than Professor Binns, and a murmur of agreeable laughter ran around the room.

Harry smiled and continued talking. "When Merlin died, his daughters were with him, and he believed they would go from his deathbed out to lead the people. What happened was that they declared war on each other, in full sight of all the wizards and witches who had come to see Merlin pass. They used all the magic they knew. They were both such powerful Ladies that they destroyed each other almost at once. But each, when she saw that she was dying, worked a mighty enchantment, a spell whose name has been forgotten because it was too dangerous to keep alive.

"That spell bound their hatred and their cause and their magic into the watching wizards and witches, making everyone their magical heirs, in a way. However, because the two sisters were equal in strength, the enchantments ripped their power, which was the sum of all power, in half, and one set of wizards and witches was infused with Light principles and spells, the other with Dark principles and spells."

"I never heard of anything like that," said Padma Patil, her brow slightly wrinkled as she leaned forward. "That would mean—that would mean that most of the divisions between us are just the product of jealousy and hatred, and that we're just acting out a feud centuries old." She sounded uncertain, even disgusted, but her voice gained strength as she continued. "The differences between Light and Dark wizards are greater than that."

"Oh, yes, now," Harry agreed, raising his voice slightly to be heard over Hermione's hisses at Zacharias. "But that is what the story claimed was their origin. And it doesn't pretend to explain everything like the way that Light and Dark families handle themselves in battle. It does say, though, why so many attempts at reconciliation have failed. The sisters couldn't forgive each other, and they sent their

hatred through their spells. Even when someone does make a motion, on one side or the other, to give up a grudge or make a marriage across magical lines, it doesn't matter. The hatred just suffers a little interruption, and goes right on affecting people in more subtle ways, such as making them think the people who forgive grudges are weak, or turn their backs on the newly married couple."

He could see by the looks on most people's faces that he'd displeased them greatly with that story. Harry shrugged. "I don't know if I should believe it myself," he offered. "I like it because it suggests that wizards are all the same, really, and the differences between us aren't unconquerable. If everyone could give up their grudges at once, perhaps we could break the spell."

Privately, Harry thought that the story probably wasn't true, or that he couldn't afford to believe it if it was. If nothing else, it might give him too much hope.

"What about you?" That was Neville, his face flushing as people looked at him, but his courage firm as he held Harry's eye. "Do you think that you could break the spell? Do you think you're strong enough?"

Harry blinked, and shifted uncomfortably as gazes turned towards him, again. "I don't know," he said. "I don't think so. Those sisters were the strongest Ladies who ever existed, if the story is right, Merlin's heirs. I know my place. I'm nowhere near that powerful."

"I don't know if power matters so much as determination," said Millicent. "And when you are determined, Harry, you can do nearly anything." She turned towards the class. "Harry saved my mother's life last night, when she gave her magic to my newborn sister and Harry gave part of his magic to her."

Hermione's head whipped around, and she was the first one to ask a question. "What does that mean, Harry? Does that mean that she's not a witch now? Or is she a truly powerful one, like you?"

Harry could see that new thought taking fire in the eyes around him. Most people had been frightened at the thought that he might absorb their magic. They hadn't thought it was possible for him to give it back.

"I gave her enough to bring her back up to average levels," said Harry firmly. "I used some—some of the magic I'd taken from the Headmaster." He swallowed against the way their looks sharpened. "She is a witch, but not connected to me in any way. I surrendered that magic, not lent it. I made it part of her."

Millicent grinned at him. And Harry realized, too late, as the murmurs raced around the room, that she'd probably done this on purpose, to make people notice and realize what he'd done.

He wondered, then, if his position among the students had irrevocably changed, so that no matter what he did, it would be impossible to hide himself again.

"No, Zacharias!"

Harry jerked his head around. Hermione was on her feet, hands planted on her hips, her face an angry red.

"No, I haven't been dating Krum, and no, I don't know why he chose me for his hostage, and no, I don't care for you to tell me yet again that there must be something between me and Krum because of it! You're not being rational or intelligent about this, you prat!" Her hand connected with Zacharias's cheek in a ringing slap, and she marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Harry sat in silence as the snickers began, sorry for Hermione and Zacharias, but relieved that no one was staring at him now. Maybe not so irrevocably changed, after all. People will always find something else to focus on.

"It's smaller than I imagined," Harry breathed, looking around Wayhouse.

And it was—certainly smaller than Grimmauld Place. But it was more intensely magical. Harry could feel the staircases themselves

thrumming with latent power, both Light and Dark. The walls, made of a smooth, polished silvery wood that he didn't recognize, and without a splinter or knot when he ran his hand across them, sang a bass note that was calmer than most of the wild singing he'd heard of late. The rooms had ceilings barely high enough to clear Narcissa's head, and were almost all rounded at the corners, formed like chambers in a hollow tree. Objects were everywhere, ordinary ones strewn carelessly among magical artifacts.

"It's beautiful," Harry told Narcissa, as they entered a room with a large table in the middle, scattered with books. It had no other furniture, so Harry didn't know if it was meant as a reading room, or if someone had carted the books in and left them here. "Did you spend any time here when you were a child?"

Narcissa smiled a bit, and reached out to touch one of the walls. Harry blinked as her finger vanished to the first knuckle, before the wall spat it out again. "A few summers, or parts of summers. We usually wound up leaving early. Wayhouse has a—unique sense of humor. Rather like Cousin Arcturus," she added dryly, as if reminded of something. "If it had really wanted to reject us, then it wouldn't have mattered if Regulus lowered the wards. We still wouldn't have been able to get in."

Harry nodded, and turned his attention to the books as Narcissa cast a few more sensing spells, trying to find any trace of Regulus's body. He caught his breath when he saw the top one, and reached out to stroke it with a shaking hand. He understood why Narcissa had wanted him to see it.

The book looked like a journal, and on the front had a silvery sketch of a lion, highlighted here and there with twinkling points Harry thought were meant to represent stars. That in itself wouldn't have been significant, but Harry knew what Regulus had been named after—the heart of the lion, a star blazing in the constellation Leo.

"Why do you think no one found this before us?" he whispered to Narcissa.

"I don't know," Narcissa admitted, looking up from what must have been yet another failed spell, judging by the expression on her face. "It was hidden in a small compartment at the foot of the stairs, but Bella—Bellatrix could have found it there. I did find signs that she'd been here, too, years ago, but that she left in haste. Perhaps she just didn't have time to search."

Harry nodded, and opened the book.

He faced a multitude of scraps of paper, as though Regulus or someone else had torn out many pages. There were two or three pages still loaded with shaky handwriting, though. Harry bent over and, squinting, managed to read them.

May 1st, 1981

Oh, Merlin, am I really going to do this? I think I am, or what was all that planning about? But V. doesn't know I know about L. That won't last long.

L. Why did I pick that one? Because I don't know where the others are, of course. Stupid question.

Going to the c. shouldn't take much more than three days. Have to take someone else. Can't trust anyone. Suppose I'll take R., then. There's no one to miss him.

S. got in trouble again last night. P. helped him—but I don't know if it was helped him get in trouble, or helped him get out of it. I wish I could dare trust them. They're the most competent out of all of us. I wish there was something I could say that wouldn't get me killed on hearing of it.

May 5th, 1981

I meant to go to the c. last night. Had the perfect opportunity. Got R. drunk and everything.

And then I couldn't do it. I looked at R., and then S. came in and said V. wanted me for something, and my courage fled. That's always

been my problem, lack of courage. Wish I were more like Sir. He had the courage to cast our parents away, everything about the fucking Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. Would that I could do the same.

June 21st, 1981

Still haven't gone to c. I have to go soon. V. still doesn't know I know about L., but that can't last long. And now there's some muttering about a prophecy. P. has apparently suggested that the Potters have something to do with it, or the Longbottoms. I know that I should despise him, hate him. He's betraying Sir. and his friends. So why can't I shake the feeling that he's among the best of us? Except maybe S.

Certainly better than me.

July 17th, 1981

Done. Done.

I couldn't take R. after all. My courage failed me. I took an M. and crossed to the c. Merlin, it was horrible. I wouldn't have gone at all if I'd known what it would cost. But I went, and I've got L.

It can't be long now. I only have a few days to live. I have to figure out how to destroy L., before V. starts noticing it's gone.

Merlin help me.

July 19th, 1981

No time. No time. V. found out, and they're coming for me. I have to take L. where I know it will be safe.

They're coming.

They're at the door. Just enough time to hide this.

If someone actually finds this and knows what the hell I'm talking about, then search for the others by the light of the fourth brightest one of us.

Harry took a shaky breath and leaned away from the journal. Narcissa met his eyes.

"You should take the journal with you," she said quietly. "Now that the wards are down, Bellatrix may be able to come here any time she wants, if she thinks of it."

Harry nodded, and slid the journal into his pocket. "The Death Eaters caught him here, then."

Narcissa nodded in turn. "I think they did. But I have no idea what he was talking about. Do you?"

Harry thought about it, but had to shake his head. He thought he knew who at least a few of the coded references in the diary must be to—P. had to be Peter—but R. could have had several identities, and the torn pages of the journal must be carrying the secret of the c. and the L. with them.

"And I can't find any trace of him here," Narcissa continued, the frustration breaking through her voice like sharp rocks through water. "Maybe they didn't place his body in Wayhouse. There may be places in Grimmauld that we haven't tried yet, or Silver-Mirror, or Cobley-by-the-Sea." She shut her eyes in thought a moment. "We might as well search, though."

And search they did, but turned up nothing. Harry passed through a room filled with maps and books, another with portraits that winked at him or leered or loudly demanded their tea, a room strung with delicately colored cobwebs on which silver spiders kept up a shining patrol, a nursery strewn with blocks and dolls and carved wooden and brass figurines, a bedchamber filled with small nasty things that darted out to bite his ankles and then went back to hiding under the bed, and numerous others, but could find nothing that would point to Regulus. Narcissa investigated the hiding places she knew, and also came up empty.

Narcissa clasped his hand before she Apparated them back to Hogwarts. “We will find him, Harry. We have come closer today than ever before. At least we know that he was in Wayhouse as late as July 1981.”

Harry nodded. He was captured just a few days before Connor and I turned a year old. That’s odd to think about.

“Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said, and, as they Apparated back, braced himself for a scolding from Draco for leaving him behind, though it was Draco’s own fault that he hadn’t woken up to repeated shakings and invitations to come along.

Minerva sat down, slowly and shakily, behind her desk, and rubbed one hand over her eyes. Both the tasks of readjusting the wards to take notice of her and keeping an eye on Albus Dumbledore were exhausting, and she was not truly sure which one was worse.

The wards were difficult to coax and persuade. Many of them were not really sentient, only devoted to their task of protecting the walls and windows and grounds of the school—protective spell piled on protective spell, until they became not just a compendium of defenses but a separate thing. The Founders had created most of them, and then Headmasters down the centuries, and Dumbledore had woven more. The ones that Dumbledore had created were particularly sulky when asked to notice her. If it were not for that first ward in the Great Hall, which tended to follow Minerva as a crawling snake of blue light, she thought she would have given up in discouragement.

And then there was Albus, constantly speaking of the first war and reminding her of what good the Light had done then, and was she really going to turn her back on the Light now, with Voldemort rising again? He tugged up so many memories that sometimes Minerva thought she had spent more time that day looking at them than the wards. And the hell of it was, some of what he said was right. The Light did have a part to play in the war, and it did need a strong leader, one who, if not unquestioned, at least had enough weight of

reputation and trust from the people around him to get things done without waging a dozen arguments.

What he's blind to, Minerva thought, as she warmed herself a cup of tea and prepared to settle down to neglected marking, is that that leader can't be him anymore. I wonder if it could have been from the time he decided to bind Harry with a phoenix web.

The full truth of that had come out in the past two weeks, as well. Minerva swallowed sickness and bowed her head as she considered it.

Something soft and warm nudged her hand. Minerva blinked down, and saw the blue ward there. It crawled into her lap and curled up like a kitten, demanding to be patted with another push of its "head" against her hand. Ordinarily it protected the Gryffindor table, but now it seemed to have adopted her. Minerva smiled slightly and caressed the ward. A tingle like lightning ran up her arm.

"You will become the leader we need."

Minerva jerked her head up with a startled gasp. Someone was standing in the corner of her office, a cloaked and hooded figure. Minerva started to lift her wand from the desk, until she realized that the ward was curled up in her lap, still purring, and not deigning to notice the figure.

"Who are you?" Minerva hissed, smelling smoke and fire.

"My name is Acies," said the figure, in a deep, hoarse voice that Minerva couldn't be certain was a woman's, though her instinct was to say so. "I shall not give you my surname at the moment. It would cause problems. Suffice it to say that I can pass in and out of the Hogwarts wards, and I have been observing you and Harry, and I like what I see in both cases."

Minerva picked up her wand, ward be damned. "If you hurt anyone here—" she began.

"I do not want to," said Acies. "I came only to establish the beginning of a connection that we must have. I can see that."

"Are you a Seer, then?" Minerva asked, her annoyance rising. Merlin knows we do not need another Trelawney running about the grounds. Minerva despised Divination, mostly because its practitioners claimed so much for it that was not even possible.

"I can see around some corners that concern myself," said Acies. "Not all. This time, I wanted to see you. I have seen you. I will go now." She turned and walked through the wall.

Minerva stared hard, then rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't seeing things. No, the figure was gone, and the wards in the stone, some of the first to be attuned to her, hummed on happily. Minerva picked up her cup of tea and took a sip without removing her eyes from the spot on the wall where Acies had vanished.

The beginning of a connection we must have.

You will become the leader we need.

Minerva almost wanted to believe the words, because there was something hopeful in them.

But anyone who could pass in and out of the wards was bound to cause trouble. Minerva was responsible for part of the safety of the school now, and she was ashamed enough about the part she had played in weakening the wards earlier in the year, even if that part had been unwitting.

She turned back to her students' essays, her lips pursing. Damn Seers and their superstitious nonsense! It's not enough to have to listen to Trelawney's babbling at the head table, now I have to do it in my own office...

Chapter Forty-Nine: Must You Remind Everyone That You Are a Parselmouth?

Harry was very pleased with himself when he shut his eyes that night in the third week of March. He had had another guarded conversation with Karkaroff, in which, while he hadn't promised anything, the man seemed predisposed to ally himself more closely with Harry. He was getting along with Snape, at least vaguely, and Draco. James's letters were not too awful. Dumbledore kept his distance and muttered every now and again. The amount of post had diminished, probably because there had been only one article about him in the Daily Prophet this week, and that had been mostly Skeeter digging up and rehashing old facts. Connor was doing well with Parvati, and if Hermione was avoiding Zacharias right now, it was no more than the prat deserved. The other Slytherins had mostly fallen into comfortable routines in which they ignored Harry's newfound prominence, at least to his eyes. His friends were happy. He felt he could sleep the sleep of the just.

Of course, that meant his sleep was all the more likely to be interrupted, and he really should have known that.

"Wake up."

Harry blinked his eyes open, and saw one of the Many clinging to his arm, its agitated swaying back and forth bringing him out of sleep more effectively than even Millicent's banging on the door a few weeks ago had done. This was a snake that could spit poison in his eyes if it felt that he wasn't waking up fast enough. Harry touched its back to calm it, and said, low enough that he wouldn't wake the other boys, "What is it?"

"Our eggs! They are hatching! We thought that you would like to watch the birth of a new hive." The snake curled back on itself, as though it thought Harry would really refuse an invitation like that.

Harry paused before accepting it, though. His instincts might be wrong, but in that case, the worst that would happen was that Draco would mutter about being woken up and say no. "Can I invite a friend to come witness the hatching with me?"

“As long as he does not break the eggs.” The Many snake tightened its tail around Harry’s left wrist. “And as long as he hurries.”

Harry nodded, then dragged on his robes again, performed a warming charm—edge of spring or not, it would be cold in the Forest—and then padded over to Draco’s bed. When he opened the curtains, Draco was lying there with a silly smile on his face. Harry hesitated again, but decided Draco could have pleasant dreams almost any night of the week, while the birth of a Many hive was not something that would happen often. He reached out and shook his shoulder.

“Harry,” Draco muttered, coming awake. Harry wasn’t sure whether he was talking to his real or his dream self, at least until Draco blinked and focused on him. “What’s the matter?”

“Must something be the matter every time I’m awake in the middle of the night?” Harry asked.

“Yes, it must,” said Draco, sitting up and swatting at invisible things in his hair. “It always has been so far.”

Harry shook his head and gestured so that Draco could see the snake on his arm. “I’ve been asked to attend the hatching of their eggs. Do you want to come along?”

Draco stared at him for so long that Harry started to get worried. Should I not even have asked him? What is the matter? “Draco, if you don’t want to, then you don’t—“

“Thank you,” Draco said, low and heartfelt, and then hurried to put his own robes on. Harry watched him in puzzlement, which only increased when Draco turned and flashed him a dazzling smile.

He is acting strange again.

“Here we are.”

Draco had followed him mostly in silence, though once or twice he had commented on how cold it was, and he had complained about

tripping over his feet until Harry had cast a mild light spell. Now, though, he blinked and stared at the hole in the ground. "If the nest's underground, then how can we see the hatching?"

It wasn't something Harry had thought to ask the Many snake. He hissed at it, and the cobra gave a slight wriggle of irritation. Harry suspected most of the hive's attention was on what was happening beneath them, and they resented having to spare a bit of themselves to answer him. "You will be shown."

Harry repeated that to Draco, who didn't look impressed. "What do you mean, shown—"

The dirt beneath their feet abruptly turned both green and gold. Harry gasped aloud as he watched it. This was not the clear, shining light that had poured forth from his skin the day he freed the unicorns. Instead, it was gold and green darkness, if there was such a thing, the color of the Many snakes' scales. The cobra wrapped more tightly around Harry's arm, and as he gazed into the darkness, he could make out the writhing bodies of the hive. Beneath and on and around them were the eggs, a deep green, like unbroken emeralds.

"Tell your friend to take hold of you."

Harry reached out his right hand, and Draco came over and took it without being asked. He only seemed to see the light and the nest then. Harry felt him give one incredulous shiver before he stood stock still.

Harry, for his part, watched raptly as the snakes writhed. They were hissing—not Parseltongue, because he could hear this quite clearly, and it wasn't words. It was rather like the concerted sound they'd used to frighten Tybalt and John the day Harry met them in the woods. They sang in unison to welcome their children to the world, and, well, if the song was sibilant and discordant and tuneless, at least it made for an impressive fanfare for a birth.

Then a sound as of drums answered them. Harry jumped before he realized that the hammering came from within the dark green eggs. The small snakes were writhing back to their parents, or perhaps

responding to the song of the hiss, and driving their heads and bodies against the shells that imprisoned them.

Singing and drumming, the hive raised their mingled music in the Forbidden Forest on the edge of spring. Harry felt a quieter wonder that he had on the day he freed the unicorns, but it was wonder nonetheless. Draco's hand tightened its grip on his. Harry clutched him back without looking at him. He didn't think he could have removed his gaze from the Many if he tried.

The pounding became so intense that Harry was surprised the eggs had not fractured yet. As if sensing his confusion, the snake on his arm spoke words that mingled effortlessly with the communal hiss. "A hive of the Many begins their lives as one. The eggs are laid at different times, but that is the last moment they will ever be apart."

As the snake had said, the eggs burst all at once, clusters of emerald shell springing into the air and flying away, though they dropped back from the dirt roof Harry had almost forgotten was there. The tiny snakes, about a third of the size of their parents, sped out and wrapped around each other, forming a great ball. Harry could hear their greetings to each other, in voices that were probably not shriller than those of the adult Many, but sounded like it.

He smiled, watching them, and so he saw the moment when the web erupted from the dirt and tried to take them.

Harry stretched out a hand and caught the web on a wind of his magic. The bright orange thing snapped at him, splitting itself apart into jaws and talons and then running together again. Harry ignored that, and studied the construction of the damn thing. The Many had acquired a web when they came into the Forest, and he had not had the chance to see it before it took them. Now, though, he didn't intend to lose the opportunity of seeing one close at hand.

It was surprisingly simple. Of course, most wizards wouldn't want much from the Many, only that they stay far away and leave them alone. Harry could see, as the Many had specified, that the web would prevent them from using their magic or venom to defend

themselves outside the Forest, unless they were also defending a wizard.

The orange web pressed forward, mindless, against his constraints, wanting the tiny new hive. Harry frowned, and made his decision. They were born free. They should remain so.

He clasped his hands together and squeezed. The web closed together into a ball as well, shrieking in agitation. Now that Harry's wandless magic was bound more closely to his body, he found it easier to use gestures to command it, and as he bore down, mashing his palms together, the web shrank into a concentrated ball of orange light and then winked out.

"Thank you."

Harry nodded absently at the snake on his arm. Draco's hand on his shook him back into awareness, and Harry glanced at him. "What did you just do?" Draco whispered. His eyes were wide, his hands shaking as if he couldn't decide whether to ask the question or not.

Harry grinned at him. "Destroyed a web." Gently, he removed his wrist from Draco's grasp and took a step forward. The music of the hissing still wove around him, calmed from its earlier height but by no means forgotten. Harry could sense the orange web around the Many. It was not so complex after all, though made to seem so by the constant motions of the snakes it bound.

"What would you do if you were free?" He spoke to the snake on his arm with confidence, knowing that the mind that listened to him was the mind of the hive itself.

The answer was a long time in coming. Harry wondered if they had to think about it that much, or if they simply wondered what he wanted to hear. He hoped it was the first and not the latter. They deserved the ability to think for themselves. Every wizard and magical creature born did.

"We would stay here in the Forest. We would hunt. We would not attack wizards unless they came along and attacked us. The Forest is

more than wide enough for us, and now that we have hatched a new hive here, we have made it home as it has not been. We can bear the taste of webs a bit longer as yet. We no longer wish to return to the home where we were born. We would stay here and refrain from roaming and biting wizards.”

Harry nodded. Even in Africa, Many hives usually did not roam about and bite people; they stayed in their dens in remote areas, and killed rodents, and communed with their own thoughts. “Then I shall free you.”

He knelt down and laid his hands on the dirt, still glowing with that dusky green-gold light that let him see the underground nest. Most of the adult snakes had ceased dancing now, and lay where they were, looking up at him. Harry felt the regard of dozens of clear golden eyes.

Their stillness made it easier. He reached out and gathered up the corners of their web with his will. So long as he wasn't actively preventing it from doing what it was made to do, it passively let him take it.

Harry checked the positions of his fingers, took a deep breath, and then ripped his hands backwards.

He felt resistance almost at once, as if the web really bound his hands and were not down there, tied around the adult snakes. The very air screamed and fought him. The snake on his arm hissed and thrashed. The web stiffened and struggled to maintain its strands, part of an enchantment so old and strong that Harry did not know who had set it, one Lord or Lady or many wizards working in cooperation. Harry could feel sticky, slimy strands sliding across his mouth and nose. He suspected that he felt what it was like for one of the hive to dwell in the web.

No longer. I will this to crack. I will it to shred. It is no longer a necessary prohibition. They have given their word, and anyone who ventures into the Forbidden Forest and hunts them is taking the risk associated with free will.

The web went taut. It might be simple, but it was very deeply-rooted, Harry knew, if a new one could spring to life every time a lot of dangerous new creatures were born in the Forest. He was struggling with the roots of a mountain, trying to tear up a tree with his bare hands, trying to separate the clouds from the sky.

I will this to crack. I will it to shred.

His hands trembled and shook, and slowly inched towards each other. If he could just bring them together behind his back, Harry thought, he would break the web. And as he channeled his will and his magic towards that task, his belief made it so, and his hands moved towards each other with more confidence.

The web was shrieking now, and Harry could feel wind stirring the branches of the Forest. There were secondary enchantments attached to the web, ones that were supposed to alert the Headmaster of the school that it had been tampered with. But Dumbledore, Harry hoped, would know better than to interfere.

I will this to crack. I will it to shred.

His fingertips brushed each other.

Now.

The web tore with a shattering symphony of hisses. Harry's hands slammed together hard enough to make his arms ache. The web around him screamed, and screamed, and splintered apart into nothingness.

The silence that followed, though not really silence because of the Many's hissing, still felt deafening. Harry panted, more exhausted than he had thought he would be. He had fought no web before that was so much an effort of sheer will. He felt Draco's hand on his shoulder, and leaned against it willingly, unable to move his arms or stand as yet. He felt his heart bounding strongly in his chest, and concentrated on that, until he felt the snake on his arm slide down his skin.

“Thank you,” said the mingled voice.

Harry opened his eyes and focused on the snake. “Of course,” he murmured, and watched it slide over to the hole in the earth and downward. The green and golden darkness flared once more and showed him the sight of the old Many surrounding the new Many and welcoming them, before it dissolved. Harry and Draco stood on what was, to all appearances, an ordinary patch of earth, except for the hole in the middle of it.

“Come on,” Draco whispered at last, when Harry could feel his eyes falling shut. “We can’t sleep in the Forest. I’m sure it’s unhealthy.”

Harry laughed at that, and even his voice sounded raspy and used, though he hadn’t been aware of screaming. He stood. “You’re right. Let’s get back to our room.” He sneaked a glance at Draco, whose expression he could see well enough in the Lumos light, though sometimes with odd shadows at the corners of his mouth and jaw. “Worth coming out here to see?”

“Oh, yes.” Draco smiled at him. “Even if I couldn’t see half of what you did. Watching them hatch was—” He shook his head and broke off. “Thank you,” he said at last, in the same tone he had used in their room.

“I didn’t arrange for it to happen,” said Harry, a bit bemused.

Draco faced him for a moment, though he continued walking sideways so that Harry didn’t have to slow—a good thing, since he didn’t know if he could convince his tired feet to start this long journey more than once. “Not for that,” he said. “For asking me to come with you.”

Harry smiled. “I thought you would enjoy it. Besides, I wanted you here with me.”

He should have a snake. It’s wrong that he doesn’t.

Harry had fallen asleep almost instantly when he crawled into his bed. Draco had thought he would. The clearing had filled with the overpowering scent of roses as he worked his magic on the invisible—to Draco—webs, and then he had stumbled on his way out of the Forest, numerous times. He slept deeply now, his chest rising and falling in rhythmic breaths.

Draco lingered for a moment, though, watching him, since there was no one awake to tell him off and make him go back to bed.

He enjoys the company of snakes so much. He should have one. But what kind? Not a Locusta. I don't think he could stand to have one again, and besides, they're illegal and they can speak into his head. I don't want a snake to be closer to him than I am.

Runespoors are illegal to keep as pets, too. Are ashwinders? I'll have to check. They're hard to keep alive, though, I think. But it should be a magical snake. He'd appreciate it more.

Draco grinned as he climbed back into his own bed. It wasn't often he had an idea for a birthday gift months in advance.

But that's what I want him to get, so that's what he gets. Not to mention that it'll be good for him.

Draco was quite sure that he slept the sleep of the just that night. Harry dropped his fork when someone prodded him in the ribs. "Ow!" he complained, rubbing his side. "Keep your elbows to yourself, Millicent." Having her poke him this early in the morning could leave him short of breath for the rest of the day.

"Look at this," she insisted, and pushed the Daily Prophet across the table at him.

Harry sighed and peered at it, wondering what Skeeter or Melinda Honeywhistle, her main rival in reporting lead stories, would say now. It would probably be something about the Tournament, or Death Eaters, since they had nothing new to report.

He stared when he realized that the lead story featured a blurred photograph of himself crouched on the ground in the Forbidden Forest with his hands clasped behind his back, and that Draco stood beside him, bending over him. A Many snake obviously encircled his arm, and the headline above the photograph read:

HARRY POTTER SAVES HOGWARTS FROM THE WRATH OF SNAKES

The byline was Skeeter's, of course. Harry shook his head, eyes narrowing. He had started thinking she must have some magical advantage to keep reporting stories like this when he would have been sure to see her normally, and it was about time he found out what it was.

He became aware of the nervous edge to the students' stares then—he'd already forced himself to ignore so many stares that he'd missed the new emotion animating most of these—and rolled his eyes at them. Most of them looked away hastily, as though they thought the supposed Parselmouth savior would set his snakes on them if they weren't careful. Others continued looking, particularly among the Durmstrang students.

"So, is it true?" Millicent persisted.

"Of course not." Harry handed the paper back to her. "I freed the Many hive from a web on them. I wasn't protecting the school from them. More like the other way round," he muttered, and dug into his food.

He got about three bites in when he became aware that most of the Slytherin table was still staring at him. He slammed the fork down. He knew he was being petulant, but Merlin, he hadn't done anything remarkable, and they knew that he hated being looked at. "What?"

"You still went out to the Forbidden Forest last night and did something with snakes," Pansy summarized. She shook her head. "What you did doesn't really matter, Harry. It's newsworthy." She folded her arms, and looked, for a moment, remarkably like Hawthorn. "Really, I think that you should be taking advantage of this publicity,

not resisting it. You could do all kinds of things with it. Convince people that not all Slytherins are evil. Refute the idea that you're evil in any way." Her eyes drifted to the head table, and she lowered her voice. "Get rid of Dumbledore, or at least lessen his power."

"It's a kind of false power," said Harry impatiently. "You've already seen how fickle most people who read the articles are. They'll turn around when a better story comes along. I much prefer to rely on magic and alliances and the good opinions of people I can actually trust."

"False or no, it's still attributed to you." Pansy poked him now, and Harry wondered when she'd become so bossy. "One thing I learned from my father is that you shouldn't give up any kind of advantage that you received through your own efforts, even if you didn't know you were going to receive it."

Harry thought that Dragonsbane probably knew what he was talking about. Necromancy required so many sacrifices that only a driving passion could take a wizard very far into it, and Pansy's father had probably seen many spells and rituals that didn't work out exactly as he thought they would, thanks to the lack of common knowledge about the discipline. Some of them would have to have worked out well for him, or he wouldn't be alive. "I'll think about it," he said, one of his favorite phrases when he wanted to fob off attention.

Pansy frowned at him and started to say something else, but shrieks from the front of the Hall interrupted her.

Harry blinked and frowned in that direction, only to see a large green-golden ball rolling out from under the Hufflepuff table. It made its way directly towards him. Harry could tell it was the new Marauder's Map long before they arrived.

"What would you like?" he asked them, a bit surprised that they'd come. Even some of the Slytherins jumped and gasped at his sudden use of Parseltongue. Harry rolled his eyes, stood, and stepped around the table. He could worry about what damage this was doing to his reputation later. For now, the main thing was to make sure that

the hive left without biting anyone, and without any of the tiny cobras getting stepped on.

"We wish to thank you for making sure we were free." No, it wasn't his imagination; the hisses in his ears were definitely high and piping. "Our parents said thank you, but we did not."

Harry blinked. He had not imagined that the hive cobras had such a notion of manners. "Well, you've said it, and I thank you in turn," he murmured. "Now, don't you think you should be in the Forest? You will need to hunt."

"But that is not all," said the hive. "We wish to give you a gift for freeing us."

"That's quite unnecessary," said Harry, feeling the first faint stirrings of alarm. "Your thanks is more than enough."

The Many ignored him. Harry supposed each hive had a distinct temper; this one already felt different, more independent and prone to doing whatever the hell the hive mind wanted. "We can smell animosity rolling off the powerful one at the high perch. We could bite off his head and bring it to you."

Harry blinked in Dumbledore's direction. Dumbledore had a frown like a thundercloud, and he gave Harry a glance that said if he did not move the Many out of the Hall, now, there would be consequences. "That's, um, really not necessary," he said. "I don't eat heads."

"Ah!" said the Many, in a tone of happy discovery, and the small bodies that made up the top of the hive lashed. "Then we could bring you his heart." The ball started to roll towards the high table.

"No!" Harry yelped, and stumbled after them. The hive came to a halt and waited patiently for him, though some hisses were muttering about stupid snake-speaking humans who didn't know what they wanted. "Really, nothing from him. He, ah, he already gave me a gift of magic."

"Hm. Then tell us someone stupid, and we shall bite them for you."

Harry could not quite keep from glancing in the direction of the Ravenclaw table, where Gorgon and Jones sat petrified at the far end. The hive practically bounced as they rolled towards them, and their chatter now concerned the desirability of ridding the world of idiots.

"No, not them, either," said Harry wearily.

The hive pulled up, and now its collective voice was haughty. "We do wish to thank you, but you are being most ungrateful in return."

Harry looked around the Hall. Most eyes were fixed on him, though their owners had ceased to scream and sat in outraged silence. "Most people here are afraid of me," he said. "Could you do something that would reassure them?"

"Why?" The Many were most definitely sulking. "Let them be afraid. It is not our fault that they are stupid and will die if we bite them."

"Something beautiful," Harry said as persuasively as he could. "Something that will show you off, and let them see you to advantage."

The hive paused only a moment then. Then the great ball of it broke apart, and snakes raced in every direction, climbing the stone walls. Others slithered over to Harry and climbed his legs and body the way their parents had in Knockturn Alley. Two of them looped lazily around his head and hissed at those people who screamed.

Harry, his heart in his throat, hoped that the snakes were not going to make themselves the last beautiful sight most of the people here would ever see. From the height the great majority of them had climbed to on the walls, they could hit many eyes with their spray of venom.

But they did not. Instead, they paused, and then began to glow with vivid patterns of green and golden darkness, the same kind of light that had illuminated their nest last night.

Harry caught his breath in wonder. Around him, most people did the same. Where Harry's platitudes in English, and certainly the sight of the Many, would not have reassured them, the sight of the hive glowing like jeweled sculptures did. Beauty had a way of getting through to people, Harry had found.

The light varied, rippling across the room, shading from brilliant gold near the head table to deepest emerald near the back of the Slytherin one. The snakes coiled on Harry's head beamed yellow light in one direction and green in the other, crawling in circles to insure the beams varied. The ones on his body created a chaotic medley of flashes and glimmers and gleams, appearing as one color and then another whenever they wanted.

Harry heard some gasps and sighs by the time the snakes descended from the walls and him, gathered themselves into a ball, and rolled out the door again. He called a soft farewell, and received a hiss that said he was lucky to have seen the light, and that he should visit them sometime in the Forest.

The silence when the Many had left at least did not resolve into screams or yells of protest immediately. Instead, the students chattered, and gave broken sighs, and muttered among themselves as they watched Harry walk over to the bench at the Slytherin table and start eating again.

They might be frightened, Harry knew, but the fact remained that Harry had managed to get the snakes to leave without biting anyone. At least some people had to think that meant more than just the prelude to an attack, or a showing-off of his power.

At least some of them.

Since he refused to raise his eyes from the plate for the rest of the meal, however, he really didn't know what percentage of the stares were frightened, which angry, which resentful, and which hopeful. Harry took a deep breath of the clean, cold air and folded his arms on the windowsill of the Owlery. Hedwig coasted down to him, sat on his shoulder, and nibbled at his ear.

Harry looked out over the Forbidden Forest, then closed his eyes. The pressure of the stares had got so much that he'd finally come up here to be alone, asking even Draco to stay behind. Draco had looked a bit put out, as though he'd thought ten people would wrap themselves around Harry and declare their love for him the moment his back was turned, but had let him go.

Harry had another reason for wanting to come up here. It was a year ago today, the first day of spring, that he'd met Connor up here and accidentally had the last of his phoenix web shredded by his brother's compulsion.

Hedwig demanded petting. Harry obliged her, his mind tumbling back over the last year and wondering if what he'd endured had been worth it. He thought so.

I haven't entirely kept the promise I made to myself, though, he thought, as Hedwig grabbed his hand and pulled it to the spot on her neck where she wanted to be stroked. Not to lie, or to seek out my lies if I did, to try to catch sight of all the places I could stumble and make mistakes, to see all the hidden corners of my being and expose them to the light. I have to do that to be a good vates and leader—the kind it seems I'm going to be whether I want to be or not.

I have to do better as far as that's concerned, he thought, as he watched the sunset.

Take that, you bastard!

Harry jumped. That last thought had no reason to be in his head. He turned cautiously, peering around, and wondering if Dumbledore had come up to the Owlery and inflicted him with it for some reason.

Has it been so long, the injured voice said, that you've forgotten who I am, what I sounded like, the very voice of your old comrade?

Harry swallowed, and, though he had no reason to speak aloud, felt he had to. "Regulus?" he whispered.

Yes. Merlin, did Regulus sound smug. It took me a while, but I managed to fight free of Voldemort. He thought he was so smart, tucking me in a little dark place again. But I'm used to little dark places, thanks to him. I struggled and cursed and cursed and struggled again until I was free.

Harry laughed in spite of himself, feeling his heart lift. "I heard you scream when you were torn away from my mind. I thought Voldemort must have hurt you, maybe destroyed you."

He couldn't hurt me that badly, not in that diminished state he's in. Seen him in your dreams yet? Harry felt flickers of visions teasing the edges of his consciousness, as Regulus apparently went through his memories of the last six months. No, I see you haven't. Good on you. He looks like a deformed baby.

"I haven't seen what he looks like, so you're going to tell me?" Harry protested, leaning against the windowsill. Hedwig obviously gave up on the prospect of getting properly petted, and flew back to her perch. Harry could not seem to stop grinning. "I don't want to know what he looks like."

You have to, said Regulus, voice unexpectedly soft. You'll have to fight him at some point—holy Merlin, please tell me that you did not duel Rosier again.

"That and lots of other things," said Harry wryly, clenching a hand on the back of his neck. He was overjoyed to have Regulus back, but there would be a lot of adjusting to do as he got Regulus used to some basic facts of his life. "You—missed quite a bit. And I missed you."

So I see, and so I communicate to you. More rummaging, and then Regulus paused, though Harry didn't know what memory he was seeing until he whispered, If I had a body, I would kill your mother.

Not you, too, said Harry, switching to silent speech as a Hufflepuff first-year came up the stairs and slipped over to a barn owl on a perch. She kept giving him awed glances. Harry stared out the window and did his best to look like an ordinary tormented hero until

she was gone. Everybody wants to punish my mother, for some reason.

Some reason. This is lots of reasons. How dare she say—

“I don’t want to hear it again,” Harry whispered. “Please, Regulus, don’t make me live through it. She’s been punished. It’s enough. Everybody else has agreed to leave it alone.” Well, except for Scrimgeour. And Lucius. And Narcissa. And Hawthorn. And Adalrico. But everybody else has.

Regulus gave a gusty sigh, but gave up that tangent. Harry smiled slightly as he muttered his way through more of Harry’s memories, then began laughing. I see that your little Malfoy nemesis finally gathered his courage to tell you that he loved you.

“He’s not my nemesis,” Harry protested. “He’s quite calm when he gets his own way. And why the ‘finally?’”

He’s a menace to other people, said Regulus firmly. And I knew before I—left—that he loved you. I was just waiting, somewhat impatiently, for him to have both the time and the lack of self-absorption to say it.

“Believe me, I know how lucky I am,” Harry muttered.

Both of you are lucky, said Regulus absently, and then went through the rest of Harry’s memories, while Harry grinned out the window, and reflected that, the Many’s misguided notion of a gift aside, he was enjoying this first day of spring much more than he had the corresponding day last year.

Draco had forced himself to concentrate on Defense Against the Dark Arts homework after Harry went upstairs. Karkaroff’s teaching style was far different than Mulciber’s, and he believed in having students read their textbooks and then copy passages out of them. Draco had sometimes managed to read five sentences without looking at the door to their room.

When he looked up as the door opened, therefore, he told himself that he really deserved to set the book aside, as a reward for being so good.

Harry came in with his head bowed for some reason, but he looked up soon enough, and Draco's breath caught at the way his eyes shone. Harry had looked harassed most of the day, but now he appeared as he had last night, with joy overflowing him.

"Guess what," he said.

"I can't guess," said Draco, bouncing a hand off his knee. He wouldn't go over to Harry, not when getting closer might change the expression on his face, but he needed to move in some way. "I'm horrible at guessing. Tell me."

Harry bounced over to Draco's bed, plopping himself down on his back. He grinned up at him from that angle, upside-down, and Draco felt a few threads of his self-control fray.

"Regulus came back!" Harry said triumphantly. "And he's all right! And I actually had some Ravenclaws stop me in the halls on the way back—" Draco wondered if Chang had been there, but couldn't bring himself to ask while Harry was smiling so brilliantly "—and apologize for being idiots like they had been! And so now I know the whole school doesn't hate me! And this is a wonderful day." Harry tilted his head back and laughed softly, closing his eyes as he did so.

Abruptly, before Draco could even react to him sounding as if he'd put exclamation marks after every single one of his sentences except possibly the last, Harry popped one eye open again and smiled at him. "And Regulus said that he knew since September that you were in love with me," he said. "So you were patient and willing to wait for a much longer time than I thought you were, even if part of that was the potion and the compulsion. I just wanted to say thank you, Draco." His smile grew wider.

He was smiling, for Merlin's sake. His eyes were shining, and he'd bounced. His emotions were all but purring.

Draco leaned over and kissed him.

He would have exploded in panic immediately afterwards if he'd allowed himself to explode in panic. As it was, he refused for a single moment to think that what he'd done was wrong. He took his time, neither too long nor too short, and then raised his head and looked serenely at Harry.

That wasn't wrong. It was begun in joy. It can't be wrong.

Harry blinked, once, twice, and then acquired a puzzled expression, as though he didn't know what had happened. Draco swallowed. Well, he might ignore it, I suppose. If that's the case, I won't push him.

Harry took a deep breath, and Draco recognized the flare of courage in his eyes that had been visible just before he leaped on his Firebolt and flew at the dragons. Then he lifted himself up into an awkward position, half on his leg and half on his elbow, and kissed Draco back.

Draco felt as if he were spinning down a golden abyss, and so great was his surprise and elation that it was hard to feel half the embarrassment he'd expected. He let Harry break the kiss and draw away, and then watched him carefully.

Harry tilted his head to the side, and studied him back. Then he grinned again.

"I liked that," he said.

Draco swallowed, and tried to think of something magnificent to say, and realized that he could think of absolutely nothing. Apologies were obviously beside the point, and he wouldn't have meant them anyway. Asking if Harry had liked it was pointless. Explanations would sound stupid.

Harry said the words instead, taking his hand and gripping it hard enough to hurt. Draco could feel the oddest mixture of emotions pressing against his empathy: the cold wind of fear, backed and countered by a warm one. Judging from the expression on Harry's face right now, the warm wind was awe.

“I’m terrified of this half the time. That doesn’t mean anything, Draco, and it’s certainly not occasion for you to coddle me.” Harry lifted his head, and his eyes flashed. “And I’m not doing this because I think I owe you for falling in love with me, so put that out of your head if it’s there. I always thought that love like the sun can’t be based on people owing each other compensation for something. It wouldn’t work. I just didn’t think I would ever have that kind of love, or the chance at it.”

He swallowed, then said, “And if that really is within my reach, then I want to strive for it. It’s—it’s easy to say this, right now, when the fear is being kept at bay. I’m sure there are times I’ll tumble and want to hide. You’ve seen them already. And this will probably take a long time. But I promise that I’ll keep on going. I promise you.” His breath came faster, and the cold wind increased, as if he were about to say something more terrifying than all the rest. “I want this.”

Draco had the sense, then, to let Harry give him a quick, nervous smile, climb into his own bed, and draw the curtains shut. It was best not to say more, anyway. It still would have sounded stupid or been pointless.

He closed his eyes, and smiled.

That was all that needed to happen right now.

Chapter Fifty: Demands, and Harry Not Taking Well To Them

Harry dreamed.

This time, he was in a place that he didn't recognize, unless it was another room of the old house where Voldemort had been the last time Harry had seen him. He flattened himself to the ground at once and cocked his ears forward, listening and looking for some sign of Nagini.

Nothing. She was probably dead.

Harry refused to take much for granted in these visions again, however. He slunk forward with his belly against the floor, and twitched his whiskers from side to side, in hopes that his nose would give him some useful information. The scent of the fire, and some sweet, spicy smell that he didn't really want to think about overpowered everything else, however.

"Evan."

Harry felt the fur along his spine stand up. That voice, he knew. If he ever met Voldemort in person, he wouldn't need to see him to recognize him—which was good, since, as Regulus had pointed out, he hadn't seen him in his dreams yet anyway.

His eyes revealed a divan ahead now, with its back to him, as usual. The fireplace was in front of that, sending dim light and shadows flickering around it. The floor under Harry's paws had a threadbare rug, with no recognizable design, even though Harry thought his eyes were better in this form than in his human one. Voldemort must be sitting on the divan, and Rosier was standing in front of him, his head half-bowed, as though he wanted to take a posture of humility, but was not sure it was worth it.

"Yes, my lord?" Rosier sounded bored. Just as he claimed in his letter, Harry thought, and then reminded himself that Snape had said not to trust anything that Rosier wrote. He stayed where he was, still sniffing for some sign of Nagini, locating nothing, and listening to the conversation.

"I have a new task for you." Voldemort's voice all but caressed the air. "My loyal Death Eaters went to prison for me once. I would not have any of them remain there longer than necessary. Contact Greyback. You and he will free Walden and Rabastan from their confinement in the Ministry's prison."

Rosier jerked his head up, and his eyes burned brightly. "Thank you, my lord," he said softly. "That is truly a task worthy of us. You have always tended to reward me well." Harry wondered if he imagined the unspoken words that followed that sentence: when you bother to reward me at all. He paused, then added, "Bella will not be joining us?"

"No," said Voldemort. "She is quite busy preparing the correct incantations. You know what she wants to do?"

"Yes," said Rosier simply. Harry lashed his tail. What does she want to do?

"I find it a fitting plan," said Voldemort. "Do you, Evan?" His voice was direct, and cold, and horrible, but Rosier merely laughed as though he could think of no finer play than answering questions from the Dark Lord.

"Of course, my lord," he said equitably. "It entertains Bella, and Merlin knows that she needs to be entertained."

The cold voice altered. "I will not have you making fun of the others this time, Evan. We are not numerous enough that we can afford to lose anyone, on a mission or at any other time. Do you understand me? There will be no more torturous spells practiced on your fellow Death Eaters."

"Of course," said Rosier. Harry scraped one paw across the floor. Even I can hear the mockery in his voice. How is it that Voldemort does not hear it? "Our mission is different this time. Your most elaborate plans are going forward, and we must adapt our tactics to those plans. This time, you intend to win the war, and to kill the Potter brat who foiled you before."

Perhaps it soothed Voldemort to have his own schemes repeated back to him, because he said a moment later, "That is it exactly. Yes. Go, Evan, and when you are finished, then return at once with Walden and Rabastan. I will need to speak with them about future raids. There are books I want, which are currently under the protection of those who will not deign to give them to me freely." Harry heard anger that could crack stones in those words.

"And Greyback?" Rosier asked.

"The next full moon is not for several days," said Voldemort. "That should give him time to position himself. The north, Evan. It is time that some of our enemies learned the cost of defying me in secret."

"Of course," said Rosier, a deep delight in his words. He started to step around the divan.

Harry decided the conversation must be done, and prepared to withdraw, brain whirling with all the information he had learned. But he paused when he realized that Rosier had indeed come around the divan—and was looking directly at him.

Harry froze, his heart loud in his ears.

Rosier saw him. His eyes widened, and then narrowed, and then he opened his mouth. Harry prepared to tear his way out of the dreamscape.

Rosier shut his mouth again, tossed Harry a wink, and then kept walking. Harry cringed back to avoid touching his robes, staring after him the while.

What is he playing at? He obeys the orders of his lord eagerly enough. Can he really want me free to roam the connection between Voldemort and me, just so that he can have some entertainment?

Then Harry told himself to forget about that. Rosier and Greyback are going to hit the Ministry, he thought, even as he scrambled back into the darkened part of the room, further from the divan, and tugged

against the bond that tied him to Voldemort, trying to wake up. I don't know if I can firecall in time. I certainly can't owl. And I don't know where the prison is.

I'll fetch one of the Aurors guarding the school instead. It's the best plan.

At last, the bond parted like raveled rope, and the vision rained down in pieces around him, allowing him to wake in his own bed.

Harry blinked stupidly for a moment. Luckily, that didn't last very long. He leaped to his feet and dashed for the door. Since he wasn't going into the Forbidden Forest, he didn't bother with robes and warming charms. They would only take precious moments that he didn't have.

"What the hell—" somebody was already saying, but Harry ignored whoever it was as he shut the door behind himself and slid as fast as he could down the stairs to the common room. His scar was pouring blood into his eyes, and there was the usual headache, almost unnoticed by now. He didn't know why Draco hadn't come into this dream, perhaps simply because he hadn't woken up in time, but they could discuss it later. Everything would have to wait until later, or at least until after he had warned the Ministry.

He became aware of a buzzing noise near his ear, and frowned. As he opened the door to the common room and plunged into the corridor beyond, he whispered, "Claudo inimicum." It wasn't a very powerful spell, but it sounded as though someone had sent a tracking charm along with him. This wouldn't have to be very powerful to contain something like that.

A jar formed in the air beside him and shut firmly around the thing buzzing next to his ear. Harry turned and caught it, then stared as he saw a beetle crawling around the inside of the glass.

No time. Harry shook his head, stuffed the jar down the pocket of his robes, and then pulled up a map of the school in his head. Tonks is patrolling the entrance hall tonight. She's closest.

He took the stairs from the dungeons two at a time, and slid out into the open, glancing around frantically. He grimaced when he realized

that Tonks was nowhere in sight. Did she trip over something and hit her head again? he wondered. That had happened three times in the last week alone.

He narrowed his eyes as he thought some more about it. Feverfew's on the second floor. He took off again, and then someone grabbed his shoulder and nearly earned himself an early death.

Harry turned with a sharp hiss, only to see Snape behind him, his arms crossed and his gaze stern.

He didn't say anything, perhaps because his eyes had caught sight of the blood on Harry's face. "What do we need to do?" he asked. "What are the requirements of your vision?"

"Voldemort's sending Rosier and Greyback to the Ministry prison," said Harry. "I need to find an Auror to let the Ministry know, but I can't tell where anyone is." He darted a glance around, just in case Tonks appeared out of a corner, and wound up shaking his head. "I'm going to Feverfew. Come on."

Snape said nothing to dispute him, but glided swiftly at his right shoulder as they made for the stairs. Harry realized, uneasily, that the school was more silent than he had ever dreamed at night. Of course, most of the time he was outside the castle if he was awake now, but still, it was disconcerting.

The stairs cooperated, for once, and they came out on the second floor without being forced to backtrack. Harry's mind kept trying to calculate times and distances the while, and kept giving up. Without an idea of where the Ministry prison was and how heavily warded it was, he had no idea when Rosier and Greyback might get there and manage to break in.

Harry risked a call down the corridor, since not many people actually lived on this floor. "Feverfew!"

No answer. Harry shot a glance at Snape, whose eyes were narrowed, and who cast a spell that Harry didn't recognize, but which made his wand glow red. Snape cursed a moment later.

“What?” Harry demanded, thinking again. Haverbull was patrolling the third floor, if they really had to go that high.

“Feverfew is incapacitated, wherever he is,” said Snape shortly. “Asleep or injured—enough that he cannot respond to us.”

Harry stiffened. “And you think Tonks is—”

“Almost surely the same way, yes.” Snape was staring into the shadows the torches cast now, looking as if he would like nothing better than to bring the walls down. “I presume it will do us little good to go to Mr. Haverbull and the others. Whoever did this would not be stupid enough to miss any of our happy crew of Aurors.” His voice was thick with disgust.

Harry took a deep breath. “Second best plan, then,” he said, and turned to Snape. “Do you think that I could firecall Scrimgeour from your rooms?”

“You may do it from mine, Mr. Potter.”

Harry jumped, and then turned around. Professor McGonagall stood behind him, her eyes narrowed and a candle in her hand. Around her ankles twined the blue line of a ward, purring like a cat when Harry glanced at it.

“Quickly now,” she added, when both Harry and Snape stood there. “I felt something wrong earlier this evening, when the wards began to whine. However, they could not tell me the nature of the threat.” She frowned. “Or perhaps I am not attuned enough to them to read it.”

“And Dumbledore?” Harry asked, sliding around her and towards the door of her private rooms.

“I do not know,” said McGonagall. “When I approached the Headmaster’s office, I saw a dark figure moving down the corridor. I turned to chase it, and lost it on the third floor. I can confirm that I saw no sign of Auror Haverbull.”

Harry nodded shortly, and then went into her rooms. They were bright and warm and cheerful, as he saw out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't care about anything in them now, save for the fireplace. He took a pinch of Floo powder from the dish on the mantle and cast it into the flames. "Minister of Magic's office!" he called out.

For a moment, the flames danced with a bright green color, and then they tossed the Floo powder abruptly out of the fireplace. Harry coughed and covered his face as he was dusted with it. He whirled around, not caring that he was making a mess of McGonagall's carpet. "What happened?" he demanded. "Is that what happens when the Minister's office has its Floo network shut?" He supposed he should have anticipated that. It was the middle of the night, after all.

"No," said McGonagall, her face pale. "That's what happens when someone has blocked a fireplace from accessing the Floo Network altogether." She strode over and stared into her hearth as though she could see the problem from here and know how to fix it.

Harry cursed, ignoring the way both professors said, "Potter!" practically as one being. "Someone's blocked the Floo Network and taken down the Aurors, then," he said. "That leaves Apparating to the Ministry, maybe—"

Snape's hand descended and clenched on his shoulder. "You are not going anywhere, Harry," he said, in the voice that made it seem less like an order than a declaration of fact. "There are few areas in the Ministry that are not warded against Apparition, and I do not think that you can picture any of them clearly. I will not have you splinched."

"But I have to warn Scrimgeour," Harry argued, tilting his head back and glaring at Snape. He saw his guardian flinch, and wondered why. Perhaps he doesn't like to see my face bleeding. I don't know why. It's not like it doesn't do this all the time.

"You may do so by owl post," said Snape.

"That's too late—"

“Harry.” McGonagall stepped in front of him. “How did you get this information?”

Harry sighed. I should have known she would demand to know that sooner or later. “Sometimes I have visions of Voldemort,” he said. “In this one, I heard him ordering Rosier and Greyback to attack the new prison the Ministry’s built.”

“Then warning the Ministry would not do much good anyway,” McGonagall told him quietly. “It would take some time for them to alert the prison, if what I have heard is true. It is deliberately kept at a distance from the Ministry, warded and made nearly inaccessible. In fact, Rosier and Greyback—” she grimaced as if she’d swallowed something foul when she said that name “—may not be able to find it. I know that Minister Scrimgeour has concealed its location from all but those who most need to know.”

“Rosier will find a way if anyone will,” said Harry, and then hesitated, wondering if he really wanted to tell Professor McGonagall about his duels with Rosier.

Snape knelt down in front of him and made Harry look at him with a steady, penetrating gaze. “Harry,” he said. “You cannot let your enemies convince you of their omnipotence. Rosier is playing a game. He always does that. I find it far more likely that, as Minerva said, he will be baffled by the wards around the prison and fail in this mission. What we should be concerned with now is the safety of the school. Do you fail to remember that a person, perhaps people, has managed to take down trained Aurors inside the school and block the Floo Network?”

Harry let out a slow sigh, then froze as Regulus said in his head, in a tone of sleepy incredulity, Show them that beetle in the jar that you captured.

“Wait,” Harry said distractedly, and fumbled in his robe. He drew the jar that the Claudio inimicum spell had created out and held it up to the light. The beetle crawled determinedly around the inside of it, as though determined to find a crack in the glass that would allow it to break out. The insect didn’t look like anything special, save for a faint

spectacle-shaped marking around its antennae, but Harry could remember other times when a beetle had buzzed by his head, and he thought that might have something to do with this. "Professor McGonagall. I caught this beetle as I was coming out of the Slytherin common room. Do you know what it is? Someone's unregistered Animagus form, maybe?"

The Transfiguration professor nearly snatched the jar from his hand. She examined it, and then let a sharp frown pull her lips into a pursed line. "Indeed, Mr. Potter," she said, and then placed the jar on the floor, Vanishing the glass. The beetle made a bid for freedom at once.

McGonagall snapped out a complex incantation that Harry couldn't follow half of. A sharp flash of light eclipsed the beetle's fleeing form, and the next moment, Rita Skeeter collapsed heavily to the floor. Her clothes were in disarray, her glasses almost coming off her face.

Harry narrowed his eyes. Damn, I should have known. She was in the interrogation room when Fudge and Umbridge questioned me. No wonder she could know exactly what went on there.

McGonagall loomed above Skeeter, her wand unwavering. "You will explain yourself," she said, apparently needing no help in recognizing the other woman. "How did you get inside the school?"

Skeeter gave Harry a pleading look. Harry only stared back. Their deal had not covered anything like this. Skeeter pasted a sickly smile on her face and turned around to look at McGonagall again.

"Did you know an unregistered Animagus can get inside the Hogwarts wards if carried against a student's skin?" she said. "Quite a discovery, that one. I rode against Mr. Potter's neck, usually." She made her voice into a stream of bright chatter as she looked around the room. "You live differently than I always thought you did, Professor. Gryffindor colors everywhere and only that, I was thinking. But you've done a nice job of—"

"Did you put the Aurors to sleep and shut off the school's Floo Network?" McGonagall asked levelly. "Answer me before I Transfigure you into an egg and step on you."

Harry had to duck his head to hide a grin.

“No!” Skeeter all but squeaked. “Of course not! I didn’t even know something was wrong until I heard you talking about it!” She shrank back into a smaller pile, her eyes wide and her hands quivering. Harry wondered if they were twitching because she wanted a notebook and quill. Skeeter’s reporter’s instincts were still strong. She would write about this if she could.

That led to another idea.

“Did you see who did it?” he asked.

Skeeter sighed and turned to face him, shaking her head mournfully. Harry might have believed her sad expression if he didn’t know her at all. “No. I was with you the entire evening. You’re usually the center of the action,” she added.

Harry just rolled his eyes. “I suppose you know that this means we’ll have to renegotiate our bargain,” he said.

“Bargain?” asked McGonagall.

“Rita and I made a bargain,” said Harry, his anger growing slowly as he remembered all the things and actions he wouldn’t have wanted observed by anyone. “Didn’t we, Rita? I said that I would feed you stories, and in the meantime, you’d consult me about the way you wrote them. There was absolutely nothing in there about you spying on me and getting fresh stories that way. And there was certainly nothing in there about you being an unregistered Animagus. I think I deserve another bargain. This time, be assured, it’ll tip a little more to my side of things.”

Skeeter frowned at him, but dipped her head. She knew when she was beaten, Harry saw, though doubtless she’d still try to twist the deal as much to her advantage as she could.

“Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, her voice weary. “Do I even want to know why you’re bargaining with Ms. Skeeter instead of reporting her to the Ministry at once?”

“Because she’s useful,” said Harry simply. “Although,” he added, as memory caught up with his present thoughts and Regulus poked him again, “I really should warn Minister Scrimgeour about this whole mess first, by owl post if I can’t do it any other way. I trust that you’ll stay here, Rita? If I find you gone, I just might have to write the Improper Use of Magic Office after all.”

Skeeter nodded.

“Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, as Harry put a hand on the doorknob, “where do you think you’re going?”

Is she deaf? Harry didn’t bother turning around. “To owl the Minister. I just said that.”

“With an unknown threat running around the school and disabling Aurors and the Floo Network.” McGonagall’s voice didn’t make that a question. “I think not, Mr. Potter. You will stay here where you are safe.” Harry turned around in time to see the wards on the stone begin glowing red and yellow. “Save for the Headmaster’s office, my room is currently the safest one in Hogwarts.”

Harry fought the urge to growl. As important as McGonagall’s assistance had been, in some ways he wished she hadn’t found him. He turned and looked at Snape.

Snape’s face was blank. “Harry,” he said softly, “do you not think that the Minister will want to know how you discovered this? We have yet to think of a convincing lie. Unless you wish to reveal the existence of the visions—” He paused when Harry frowned at him. “I did not think so. Either Rosier and Greyback’s attack will fail, which I think the likeliest option, and the Minister will be warned that way, or it will succeed, and your warning about it would only make you seem to be in collusion with them. Were it not for the enemy being in Hogwarts itself, I would help you to think of a lie, but it is best to stay here. I will

not lose you.” His voice was growing deeper as he went on, his face more set.

Harry closed his eyes and forced the words through his teeth and the lump in his throat. “Fine, then. I’ll let the Minister know about the visions. Can we go to the Owlery now?”

“That does not solve the problem of the enemy in Hogwarts,” said Snape.

“Damn it—” Harry turned to the door, and Snape performed a locking charm on it. A moment later, heavy school wards crawled across it. Harry glanced over his shoulder to see McGonagall flaring with red and yellow light. She dropped her hand and gave him a stern glance.

“You are the likeliest target, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Other than your brother, perhaps, and I have made sure the wards are thick and active in his room in Gryffindor Tower. This trip to the Owlery is not as important as making sure that you stay alive.”

“But there could be people who die tonight because of me!” Harry didn’t understand why they wouldn’t understand. He clenched his fists, and felt his rage stir, though luckily it was only ordinary anger, and not the Dark rage that he had put in the prison of icicles. “Rosier and Greyback could find their way into the prison, and kill some of the guards. If not, then they might at least kill some of the Ministry officials in frustration. Don’t you realize that—”

Harry.

Harry slammed his mouth shut, because that was Regulus, and Regulus might be able to give him some good arguments. You see that I’m right, don’t you, Regulus? I have to go. He began gathering his strength to fight Hogwarts’ wards. He’d never tried that before in a room where so many of them were awake at once, but he was willing to try. There were lives at stake, and he could do something to save them.

No, I think they’re right, said Regulus. This disabling of Aurors and the Floo Network has the feel of an attack directed specifically at you.

And is it a coincidence that it comes on the night that Voldemort is planning his first raid? No to that, too. Stay here, Harry.

"If someone's hunting me," said Harry aloud, "then they might head for the Slytherin rooms—"

"Wards are active there as well," said McGonagall, with a tinge of amusement in her voice. "When I thought you were safe in your common room, Mr. Potter, I activated them to guard you. You must already have left. But, I assure you, if someone threatens Mr. Malfoy or the rest of them, I shall know at once."

Harry tensed again. They were cutting down all the reasonable, persuasive arguments that he might have used to convince them. That left fighting the wards and springing to the Owlery. He would have liked to jump to the Ministry itself, but Snape was right: the few rooms he had a clear picture of there were almost certainly warded against Apparition, and trying to jump the immense distance from Scotland to London when he didn't know any unwarded places for certain was suicide.

"Mr. Potter," said McGonagall, and her voice had gone cold now. "Stop that. The wards are already in a weakened state, both from Mulciber's tampering and from the transfer between the Headmaster and me. What do you think will happen to them if you rip them apart now?"

Harry cursed and spun, creating a wooden figure with a gesture of his hand, and then setting it on fire. He could feel McGonagall jumping, as the wards spasmed with her, but none of the ashes and flames touched her carpet or walls. Harry created and burned a few more figures, just to relieve his temper, and then turned around again.

"Fine," he said. "I'll stay here. Happy?" He wasn't, he could feel his heart pounding heavily at the mere thought of people dying when he could have warned them, but he had obligations to others, too. Keeping himself alive and not tearing the wards that kept Death Eaters out when properly attended to were among them.

“Happier than I was,” said McGonagall. Her voice softened. “Harry, you must sometimes consider your own safety first, and leave other duties to other people. Do you understand me?”

Harry understood her. He just hated it, with a violent passion.

He had to do something to make himself useful, he thought, beyond pacing a hole in the carpet or burning more wooden figures. He turned to face Skeeter, who looked as though she were happy to have escaped further questioning. She shrank when she saw his expression.

“Ms. Skeeter,” said Harry, and his voice was all kinds of false politeness. “As long as you’re here, I think we should renegotiate the terms of our bargain.”

Snape lengthened his stride the moment he was away from Harry. They had left McGonagall’s office near morning, when Auror Feverfew had knocked on the door and asked in a confused voice whether they were quite all right, and if they knew why he had a large bump on his head and no memory of the last few hours. Snape had escorted Harry back down to the dungeons, not letting him out of his sight, and said that he was going to get what rest he could before classes began. Harry had nodded drowsily, obviously feeling the same way.

Harry’s bloodstained face remained with Snape as he waited for the door of the Slytherin common room to slide shut. Harry had not even seemed conscious of the blood much of the time, apart from mutters on its causing Snape’s and McGonagall’s stares at him. He was getting used to the visions, Snape supposed.

I would not have him get used to them.

Snape knew whom he suspected of this business with the Aurors and the Floo Network, and he was not about to let him get away with it.

He was already casting spells when he stopped outside the office of the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor and rapped smartly on the door. He saw no trace of the spells he suspected had been used on the Aurors, but that meant nothing. Karkaroff was Headmaster of

Durmstrang. He almost certainly knew and taught Dark Arts that were not common at Hogwarts.

Karkaroff opened the door, concealing a yawn with one hand. He froze when he saw Snape, and that gave Snape time enough to lock eyes with his old comrade-in-arms and bear inward with his Legilimency.

He stood in the representation of Karkaroff's mind: a deep pine forest, thick with drifting mist. Memories drifted by, not at all guarded, and Snape snatched at the first one.

A nightmare, a dream of Voldemort calling his Death Eaters. With an effort, Snape recognized one of the abandoned houses they had used as headquarters before the first fall of the Dark Lord. Karkaroff remembered shivering on the floor, having convulsed already from numerous Cruciatus Curses, wondering what he was doing there.

Snape backed out of the nightmare with a snarl, and snatched at another.

A more ordinary dream, a senseless stream of soldiers marching over a mosaic.

Snape snatched himself free of that, and pushed further into the forest, intending to find out whether Karkaroff had any memories of disabling the Aurors and the fireplaces. But then Karkaroff's mind started struggling, pushing against him, and the cold mist curled around his legs and tried to force him out. Snape knew that he could stay in his place, but not without damaging some of his victim's ability to remember.

He snapped out of the trance, focused his eyes, and surprised an angry expression on the other man's face.

"What do you think you are doing, Severus?" hissed Karkaroff. He had crossed his arms, as though that would help ward off the intrusion into his thoughts. "I told you, I no longer serve the Dark Lord. I have not since the last war. What is the meaning of this?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. It was true that Karkaroff remembered only dreams near the top of his mind, and that he had never been a good actor. He would have had trouble concealing his true intentions, if he really meant to betray the school. The memory of the Auror attack should certainly have been floating among the first ones that Snape reached for.

“There was an attack last night on the five Aurors patrolling this school,” he said coolly. “The Aurors here to guard Harry Potter, who, you will know, is my ward. I remember old raids, Igor, and I remember that you were assigned to disable the guards and sentries whom the Dark Lord thought it a waste to kill.” Because you were good for nothing else, his memory added, in silent malice.

Karkaroff flushed, as though he’d heard the mocking words. “And I’ve changed,” he retorted. “Ask your ward if he hasn’t had several conversations with me about this already.” He drew himself up, though that was a ridiculous gesture at this point, since he was shorter than Snape was. “I’ve had fourteen years to decide that, yes, I don’t really like living as someone always marked—or Marked—and ready to run. If the—the Dark Lord is returning, then I will help fight him.” He ended with a shiver, but with his eyes burning with a determination that Snape had to respect, never having seen it in him before.

Snape concealed a snarl. Harry did not mention that he had been talking with him. It explains, at least, why Harry did not mention his name as a suspect at once. He must not suspect him at all.

But why should he not? He is a former Death Eater with a black reputation—

Rather like you, Severus?

Snape hissed and wheeled away from the door. He wanted to find something to fault Karkaroff’s story, but his own Legilimency should have told him if the man was lying, and he did not think he was.

People can change in a decade and more.

Snape shook his head free of the thought, which was just a step up from the kind of sentimental nonsense he'd felt when he stood trial before the Wizengamot, and focused on the more important one. That means there is still someone in the school who wishes Harry harm.

"If I find you have done Harry harm, Igor—" he whispered.

"You'll hunt me down. I know." Karkaroff actually looked bored as he shut his door.

Snape made for his rooms, despite the fact that he knew he was too tense to sleep. He still had a particularly bad batch of Potions essays to mark, mostly by third-year Hufflepuffs, surely the stupidest bunch of students in the school. Those in fourth year and above had some sense about Potions, those in first and second were too awed of him to be very stupid, but in third year all Hufflepuffs seemed to go quite mad and scribble essays full of nonsense.

They would relax him if anything could, and prepare him to appear in classes.

Harry was expecting the stares that morning. He had dictated the article that he wanted Skeeter to write before letting her go. He marched resolutely to the Slytherin table, appearing to ignore them, but this time listening keenly to the murmurs that raced alongside him.

He took his seat with a faint smile. Most of the whispers were of the "Does he really mean that?" variety. But most of the students here had also seen the Many's display two weeks ago, and knew that, yes, he was serious. Harry poured himself a glass of pumpkin juice, pleased to notice that his hand wasn't shaking. Publicity was not so bad if he could control it.

And I have to do this. Voldemort is spreading his wings. I have to be prepared to do the same.

"Tell me you don't mean this," said Millicent, and slammed down the paper in front of him.

Harry glanced calmly at the headline, which was on the second page.

HARRY POTTER TO FREE MAGICAL CREATURES.

By: Rita Skeeter

In an exclusive interview with the Prophet last night, Mr. Harry Potter, already famous for his exploits in the Triwizard Tournament this year, revealed that he has great compassion for the magical creatures of the wizarding world.

"Most of them are bound with webs," he explained. "Webs to make them docile, or make them serve us, or keep them from hurting us. Sometimes simply webs to make them stay in one place so that we can look at them. And nearly all the magical creatures I've met so far have webs like this: house elves, unicorns, centaurs, Runespoors, merfolk—there's no end to it."

Asked who had established the webs, Potter said that they were ancient.

"I don't think it really matters who established them—who's to blame, that is," he said. "What matters is getting rid of them. Most magical creatures don't want to have a large amount of contact with the wizarding world anyway, or they're open to negotiations about it."

Potter should know if anyone would. He freed the Dementors last May, sending them back into nightmares, and obliging the Ministry to find new guards for Azkaban. He also confessed to having freed the unicorns who lived in the Forbidden Forest outside Hogwarts, and added that he considers using his immense power to break webs an important part of his life's work...

"Show him the article on the front page," Pansy whined, poking Millicent with an elbow.

Millicent flipped back the page, and Harry winced at the headline there, which bore Melinda Honeywhistle's byline.

MINISTRY PRISON ATTACKED, TWO DEATH EATERS ESCAPE

Harry quickly skimmed the article, cursing under his breath. The only good thing was that there had been no deaths. Though no one seemed to recognize Rosier and Greyback as the raiders, they were quite sure that they had broken into the prison, and freed Walden Macnair and Rabastan Lestrangle.

I should still send an owl to Scrimgeour about it, he thought, and then rubbed his eyes. Now I just have to remember it.

“Something to do with you, too, isn’t it?” Draco, who’d just sat down beside him, whispered in a low voice.

“Of course,” said Harry with a sigh. He gave Draco a sideways glance. “Sorry I couldn’t involve you, but, well, it happened rather suddenly.”

“I thought so,” said Draco, and cocked his head, studying Harry intently. “If it had happened slowly enough for you to involve me, and you didn’t, then I would be upset.”

Harry nodded, understanding the message, and the import Draco was giving it. Satisfied, Draco turned to eat his breakfast.

Regulus snickered in his head and said something extremely immature which Harry didn’t bother responding to.

He turned back to the plate of kippers, and breathed slowly. It wasn’t even all the stares coming his way that made him feel off-balance. Events had seized him by the scruff of the neck last night and dragged him forward, and now he felt as if he were in a race with Voldemort, both seeing who could gather allies the fastest.

And maybe who can keep them, Harry thought, as he remembered Rosier’s wink in the vision.

Stop thinking about him. He’s crazy anyway. He only wants you to imagine that he’s important. Which doesn’t answer the question of how he could see you, but then, it doesn’t answer any question about him.

“Potter.”

Harry jumped. Millicent had evidently been trying to get his attention for a few minutes, because she leaned further forward and frowned at him.

"I asked you if you really meant it," she said. "If you really want to free all magical creatures."

Harry deliberately ate a kipper before he answered. "Eventually," he said. "I think I explained how complicated it was in the article." He'd specifically told Skeeter to include that, how he didn't wish to step on anyone's free will in undoing the webs. "I know I can't just run around freeing house elves all at once, for example. They'll probably be the hardest case, and take me the longest. Except for werewolves, maybe," he added with a frown, remembering the snarling hatred Remus's wolf had held for him. "Maybe I won't even achieve everything I want before I die. But I've got a good start, and that means that—"

"And that's your ultimate allegiance." Millicent's voice was flat.

Harry blinked. "Not my ultimate one. One of my allegiances. I do want to free the magical creatures, yes. You knew that. Did you think that I would abandon your family? I don't intend to. If you need to tell—"

"We thought your ultimate allegiance was to the Dark." Pansy's voice was a whisper as she leaned towards him. "Or the Dark pureblood families. They're your most prominent and closest allies, and you took magic from the leader of the Light, Dumbledore. You're eventually going to declare for the Dark, aren't you?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I see we have a small problem," he said.

"I was in that meeting, Potter," Millicent breathed, making sure not a word went further than her, Harry, Pansy, and Draco. "I know that you promised Arabella Zabini you'd never become a Light Lord."

"Yes," said Harry. "And I'm going to keep that promise."

"But then," Pansy said, "don't you have to be—"

“Not really,” said Harry, and turned back to his breakfast.

Their eyes remained on him. This time, Harry steadfastly refused to look up at them because he was annoyed with them. I was sure they understood. Millicent should have, after what she heard me say about people being more important than magic. Or maybe they heard, but they think they know better. I suppose I shouldn't have expected some of the Dark skulls to be any less thick than some of the Light ones.

He finished breakfast and hurried to Potions. He was composing the letter to Scrimgeour in his mind as he went. Not only would he mention Rosier's and Greyback's names and warn about Greyback's possible raids in the north and Macnair and Rabastan's instructions to go after books—he'd thought of a way to disguise the origin of the information, since Scrimgeour already knew that Harry had a friend called Starborn who sometimes passed him warnings—but he intended to warn Scrimgeour about something else. It was only fair that the Minister know Harry wanted the anti-werewolf legislation obliterated. The article he'd had Skeeter write was a declaration of war, but this would be the formal announcement.

Gazes trailed after him, and so did lingering, rushing whispers. Harry put his head up and rode them all out, pushing away his terror of the attention.

I'm actually looking forward to this, he thought. Pansy, and Dragonsbane through her, were right, in a way. If all of these people give me power, even if it's a fickle, changeable power, they do it by their own choice, and they take it away by choice, too. I ought to use my fame to benefit my allies as much as I can.

Chapter Fifty-One: Troubled the Twilight

Millicent waited, patiently, her hands linked together on her lap. Both her parents would have been proud of her, she thought. Mother would have said that her daughter was showing the calm determination that any good pureblooded witch should, and Father would have sensed the busy activity of her mind and nodded at her for concealing it.

Millicent's body was patient, but her mind was indeed racing around, snatching at ideas and dragging them forward.

I knew that Harry might have some allegiances to magical creatures. Of course I did. It isn't surprising.

But I thought he only wanted to free...centaurs, and unicorns, and all the others who might be pretty but aren't really good for anything. I didn't realize that he was mad enough to want to free house elves.

The door she was listening for opened. Millicent sat up a bit and peered towards the stairs. Draco came down first, of course, turning around and talking to Harry, who walked behind him. Harry had been a bit warier since yesterday, when he had begun to realize that not everyone greeted his announcement with wide smiles and gestures of surrender.

"Potter," said Millicent, not indicating anything by her tone. She would use his surname instead, and then Harry would know that she was angry with him. "I want to speak with you."

Draco turned around, hovering between her and Harry like he was a bloody dragon. Millicent rolled her eyes. It's not as though he needs protection from his own Housemates. I just want to ask him a few simple questions.

"Of course, Millicent," said Harry, stepping around Draco. His expression was blank, more neutral than it was usually, but his voice was utterly polite. "What did you want to talk with me about?"

"Oh, you know very well." Millicent folded her arms.

"I'm afraid not." Harry looked as he sometimes had in second year, an impression that the unnerving lack of emphasis in his words only added to. "You're the one who began the conversation, so you're the one who should introduce the subject, properly speaking, Millicent."

Millicent took a deep breath. Speaking so directly went against all her instincts as a Slytherin, but though a few people were watching their conversation, as always, most were at breakfast already. Really, boys are always so abominably late. "Your little declaration of war in the paper yesterday," she said. "I want to know if you mean to free house elves."

Harry tilted his head. "I intend everything that I said in that article, Millicent."

Not working. Millicent narrowed her eyes. "I want to know your schedule, Potter. How soon do you intend to free house elves?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "It'll depend on the individual free wills of the wizards involved." His face grew more animated now, and Draco, who had been looking as though he wanted to hex Millicent, relaxed a bit. "I want to persuade them to release them, or get their permission to cut the webs."

"Don't you need the elves' permission, too?" Millicent forced an arch tone into her voice. "I would think you would want it, since you're so big on magical creatures having their own way."

"They wear a web that makes them think they like slavery, as well as one to make them serve." Harry's eyes had a depth and clarity that she had never seen before, not even the day they went into the Forest to visit his little nest of snakes. "When I cut the one, then yes, they want to be free. One of Mr. Malfoy's house elves had a raveled web, and I was able to make out that he had more free will than the other elves, too. He begged me to free him. I did."

Millicent felt a deep thrill of terror move through her veins. If what Harry was saying was true, then that meant house elves might strike

back at the wizards and witches when released, as vengeance for their long imprisonment.

“That’s—it’ll change too much.” Millicent swept her hand in a circle around the Slytherin common room. “Do you know how much of the labor in Hogwarts is done by house elves, Potter?”

“I have some idea, yes,” said Harry. Millicent had often thought him insufferable, but never more so than now, now that he was just refusing to get angry. “I did research on it when I was working out a way to free Dobby. They cook the meals, do the laundry, clean our bedrooms and all the other rooms, tend the fires, dust, take care of any items that we don’t want anymore, light the torches, return lost items to their owners, care for our—“

“So you must see,” Millicent interrupted, “what a great change you’ll be producing.” Her skin crawled at the thought of what would have happened the night Marian was born, if they hadn’t had house elves to change and clean the bed. Mother might have died before they were able to save her. “You can’t want that, Potter. You benefit from everything that they do, too.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I’m as guilty as everyone else. And the most I can do right now is try to persuade other witches and wizards that things will be better with elves freed.”

“But they won’t,” said Millicent. “And, anyway, Potter, if you wanted to, you could make freeing their house elves part of the price of alliance with pureblood families. Or you could use your magic to make them free them.” She supposed she was pushing in a stupid direction, but anything that would wake Harry from his calm contemplation was something to be desired. He couldn’t be aware of the consequences to what he was saying. He just couldn’t.

Harry stilled for a moment. His eyes at last burned, but not with the emotion that Millicent had wanted to see there. Instead, he simply looked angry and half-contemptuous, as if he would scorn her, but understood too well what had motivated her to act as she had. Millicent had got that look from her mother sometimes during her childhood. She’d always hated it.

Harry said in clipped tones, "I'll never do that, Millicent. The whole point of this is to do it without stepping on anyone's free will. If a family voluntarily offered to give up their house elves, I'd take the offer gladly. Until then, all I can try is persuasion."

"But you aren't going to win." Millicent hammered the point home with a sharp tap of her voice on the final word. She hated the thought of Harry pouring half his power and time down the hole of a useless cause. He had enough battles to fight that were going to take all his concentration and perseverance.

Harry snorted at her. "You can't know that," he said. "Maybe I can win." He stepped around her and made his way towards the door. Draco was talking to him about Karkaroff before they got out of the common room.

Millicent stared after him. She still thought that it was useless, that Harry would fail. House elves were a necessity, not a luxury, to keep places like Hogwarts and most pureblood family homes running. She was sure that he would lose.

On the other hand, she'd also thought that he would acknowledge his ties with the Bulstrode family to be more important than he'd so far showed he thought them, and that he would say he chose the Dark pureblood families first and foremost, over any of his other allies. They'd given him the most, so far. Surely he should feel the claims of a reciprocal obligation. And she'd been wrong.

She briefly envisioned a future where Harry had won, and changed her family along with the rest of the world, and made them like the change. And he wouldn't have accomplished it with compulsion or any of the other forcing magic he could have used. He would have accomplished it with their full compliance.

Millicent shuddered, and swallowed. Then she turned towards the Owlery. She could miss breakfast to send a letter to her father. She badly wanted his reassurance. She'd been wrong so far about what she thought Harry would do. Maybe he thought about it differently.

He did say that we couldn't lose him no matter what happened. I thought that he meant he didn't want Harry dying in battle or going to Light families, but maybe he meant that we can't lose him because of what he could do for us, rather than just because of what he could do for someone else. What he could do for us with our full and loving cooperation, even.

Millicent lengthened her stride. She would ask.

Pansy disdained Millicent's tactics. She didn't know why the other girl had chosen the Slytherin common room to speak to Harry. It was exactly the wrong environment. Of course Harry would hurry out of the conversation, not wanting to be late to class. And of course he would say some things, whatever they were, that turned Millicent's face a very unhealthy shade of pale.

And Draco was with him. That was the biggest mistake. Harry always spoke more confidently if Draco was there. Pansy thought he spoke those things whether or not he meant them. With a little persuasion, a little luck, and a little contrivance, then he might be pressed to admit any insecurities, if he had them.

The persuasion would have to come from Pansy herself, but the luck came from Professor Karkaroff releasing them early from Defense Against the Dark Arts, so that they didn't have to run quite as hard to their next class, and the contrivance came from Blaise, who still rolled his eyes at Harry and Draco most of the time. Pansy got him to agree to drop behind and ask Draco a series of flattering questions. Draco, caught up in the novelty of Blaise actually wanting to listen to what he had to say, fell for it like a Squib woman for a pureblood wizard.

That left Harry walking by himself, listening behind him with an amused ear, and Pansy falling into step beside him, as if by chance.

"Harry."

Harry's head shot up, his eyes turned to her, and, to her surprise, he shut his eyes and groaned. "Not you, too," he said.

Pansy narrowed her eyes. Did someone already try this way of getting him alone? "What do you mean?"

“You want to talk to me about that bloody article, too,” said Harry. “I’m sure of it. That’s all anyone wants to talk to me about today, except Draco.” He frowned at her. “Well, say your piece. I’m sure that you’ll have a few pertinent points to make, even though they’re no different from anyone else’s.”

Pansy tossed her head. She wasn’t about to back down just because she’d been caught, however. “I just wanted to know how you could do this, Harry. I can see allying with some of the magical creatures, the ones who could be useful in battle, and of course I want you to work on freeing the werewolves, so that my mother can find some way to escape her curse.” She kept her voice low on that last; Hawthorn Parkinson’s condition was still not common knowledge, or she would have been forced to go to the Ministry and register long before now. “But all of them? Really, why? I don’t understand.” Oh, I understand, but that talk about free will is a romantic vision that I would never have expected of him. He’s never shown any inclination to offer “free will” to the Light families, and he doesn’t just dash about tearing webs randomly. It has to be something different. I can understand saying that so he’d look good for the article, but his real motive has to be something else.

Harry’s anger bled away. Pansy wondered what she’d said, and whether she should try to find out for future reference. It was true, of course, that Draco had told Harry he loved him and they’d somehow both survived it, but his tricks with Harry weren’t a set that Pansy could imitate—unless Harry really did get tired of Draco someday and looked elsewhere for a bit of companionship.

Harry’s voice recalled her from her wondering. “I mean to offer freedom to as many people as I can, Pansy, in the end. That includes Light families, and it includes Light magical creatures, and it includes the ones who want to be free but don’t want to fight with us—so long as their vision of freedom doesn’t involve stepping on the free will of others, of course. If they do that, or if they join Voldemort and fight at his side, then I’ll battle them, too. But I can’t know until I ask, can I?” He paused, then added, “That’s the reason for the publicity of the article, too. Everyone deserves to know what’s coming. I don’t want to sneak up on people, not with this. I want them to know what I’m

saying, and what I'm asking, and what I stand for." He smiled. "Offering so many possibilities to so many people is the thing I'm most serious about."

Pansy gnawed her lip. She had wanted to know why Harry had so suddenly struck out for publicity after shunning it. But that wasn't her main concern.

"You don't want to just do what's useful, then," she said.

Harry shook his head.

"Then you want to do what's right?" Pansy wasn't sure how she felt about that. Of course, she knew Harry wasn't some idiotic Gryffindor, but she'd thought he was acting more Slytherin since he took the old fool's magic from him. And if he wasn't, if he did want to do what most people thought of as right, then she wondered if he really knew how the wizarding world was liable to look at him. Light was a synonym for "good" in most wizards' minds, even where it wasn't. The Dark families and wizards had been a political minority for a long time. Conform to Light standards in any way, and Harry was stepping into a slavery that wouldn't let him go.

Harry shook his head. "There's no convenient word for what I want to do. Vates comes closest, maybe. Is there a vates for wizards and witches as well as for magical creatures?" He shrugged.

"But a vates is someone who unbinds magical creatures." Pansy had studied a bit over the summer, since her mother had insisted that she understand certain key concepts anew. She'd had to learn more than how the Dark families had lost power to the Light families over the centuries, more than the history of Dark Lords and Ladies. "That much, I know."

Harry shrugged again. "I told you, there's no name for it. Freedom and possibility, and I want to offer those even to the people who oppose me. At least they'll know what they're doing. Then, if they choose to fight me, I can fight them, too, with a clear conscience."

Pansy shook her head slowly. She wasn't sure if that was better or worse than what she had suspected Harry of doing: acting Slytherin and Dark. "Do remember that if you do something the newspapers disapprove of, they can as easily flay you alive as applaud you, and then there will be an awful lot of people angry with you," she murmured.

"I know that," said Harry. "That's why I'm not going to depend on just the newspapers." He turned around and dropped back smoothly, and Draco joined him, giving Pansy a suspicious glance.

Pansy had said what she wanted to say. She went down the corridor, her brain busily working. Perhaps she would owl her mother later and ask for her opinion, but she believed she already knew what Hawthorn would say, because she knew what Dragonsbane would say. On this subject, and always assuming that Harry was sincere and really did know something about the way the world worked, her parents would speak as one.

Leave him to it. There is no one else in the world who can understand what magic he is doing so well as the wizard who does it. And do you really think that you could stop him anyway?

Pansy shook her head ruefully. All right. So the project's much bigger, and Harry's much more complicated, than I ever thought him. I believed he was becoming more Slytherin by deciding to take advantage of his fame and draining Dumbledore's magic, but maybe those were just steps along a much longer road. And he doesn't even seem to care if he dies before he reaches the end of it.

Best leave him to it.

She did add one phrase to the end of that sentence, one that she thought neither of her parents would dispute. And do what I can to help.

Harry sighed and pulled his plate out from under the ashes of the eighth Howler he'd received that evening. He determinedly went on eating as the voice ranted and raved around his head, demanding to know what he thought he was doing by insisting that wizards give up house elves.

Regulus made sarcastic comments in his head the while. Insisting that they become less like the pompous windbags they are and learn some simple cleaning charms is more like it.

Harry managed a half-hearted smile, but he was far less amused than he appeared. Draco and Regulus, at least, could feel it. Regulus made a wordless sound of sympathy, and Draco leaned across to whisper to him, "What's the matter?"

"I didn't expect this much attention," Harry whispered back.

He had been sure that the article was the best step yesterday, that his possible opposition deserved to know what he was doing so that they could respond. A political machination might be hidden, or a simple alliance. But what Harry wanted to do was larger than that, and he had no intention whatsoever of hiding that he wanted freedom for magical creatures.

It seemed he'd underestimated how many other wizards didn't want freedom for magical creatures.

He wondered for a moment, dismally, how many Howlers he'd received that day.

Thirty-two, Regulus answered promptly. And you've had seventeen conversations trying to explain what you meant, and received about seven hundred odd looks.

Harry nodded. Then he sighed as another post owl bore towards his table, wondering who could be writing to him now. At least the envelope this owl carried wasn't red.

It landed beside him, and Harry caught his breath as he recognized the official Ministry crest on the seal. Of course Scrimgeour would respond that way, rather than as the Head of the Auror Office. Harry kept forgetting his new position, even if he had helped him achieve it in some small way. Scrimgeour was busy cleaning up the Ministry, from all accounts, sacking and hiring like mad, and had not yet had

time to turn his attention to the outer wizarding world except for the most important things, like the incidents after the Second Task.

As he opened the letter, Harry wondered if his message about the Death Eaters' probable attacks had changed that, and redirected the Minister's focus.

Dear Mr. Potter:

I would like to thank you for your invaluable warnings. Your dangerous friend has risked his life to gather this information, you said, and I can well believe it. Now that we know that one of the raiders was Fenrir Greyback, we can guess how he penetrated the wards around the prison. They were not guarded against a werewolf's nose. That has been corrected. As for his attacks in the north, we will warn northern wizarding families, though without specifics we can do no more than that. Please let me know if you uncover any other details.

I must admit I was rather surprised at your article in the paper yesterday. I shouldn't be, since you often have the effect of producing sudden and unexpected shocks, but this one was from a direction so unexpected that it astounded me. Free all the magical creatures, Mr. Potter? I think you know the general state of regard for nonhumans in wizarding Britain, and even for those unfortunate individuals born human but afflicted with a curse like lycanthropy.

I must know what you expect me to do about the anti-werewolf legislation. Fine words about free will aside, you know that you could interfere with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures quite easily. You have already done so, in fact, using the Starrise boy as your stand-in. This became obvious once Umbridge was removed from power completely.

As odious as Dolores Umbridge is and was, you were mucking about in my Ministry. I have warned you about that. (I think you should also find a better tool to use than Tybalt Starrise, as the boy is utterly wild and will not follow the rules no matter what happens, but that is neither here nor there).

I understand your motives and your emotions. I could wish I did not understand them so well, since that makes my duty harder than it should be.

Do it again, Mr. Potter, and you may consider me your enemy. The Ministry should remain a place for ordinary wizards. I will tolerate no Lords interfering in it. Leave the softening of the anti-werewolf laws to me. I intend to bring them back down to what they were before Cornelius in his fear pushed them to a ridiculous height, but I intend to do it. Your urging only raises my hackles.

Rufus Scrimgeour,

Minister of Magic.

Harry had lost his appetite entirely. He stood, pushing his chair back from the table, and made for the door of the Great Hall.

Draco caught up with him before he'd left, of course. "Problem?" he inquired lightly.

Harry handed him the Minister's letter without speaking and bowed his head. He had a dull pulse of regret working in his throat. He had not even considered that sending Tybalt Starrise and John Smythe-Blyton after Umbridge would constitute interfering in the Ministry. He had simply done it, determined to stop the hunting of the Many, and roused Scrimgeour against him as a result. He could not say that he'd not been warned, not when he'd known Scrimgeour's feeling about Lords in the Ministry from their first meeting.

It's stupid, said Regulus in his head. He's reacting to something that happened even before he became Minister. And he's mucked around himself, hasn't he? What's he so upset about?

That was him, Harry thought back in misery. A Ministry person, someone who would give his life to defend it—or at least what he thinks it could be, if it was under the proper guidance. And I think he did try to ignore it as long as he could; the letter implies that by saying that my deception became obvious once Umbridge was out of power.

Deception? Do you really regret what you did?

Harry sighed. No. But I regret making him angry, and I regret what it may cost us in the future.

Regulus made a disgusted sound. You're too young to be thinking about this, Harry. Politics and compromise and the be-damned Ministry. You should be thinking about Quidditch and classes instead.

No Quidditch this year, and I skim through classes, you know that. My mother foresaw that. She couldn't teach me everything, but she wanted me to be as prepared as I could be, so that I could devote more time to guarding Connor and less to worrying about schoolwork.

"What are you going to reply?" Draco asked quietly, handing the letter back to Harry. He tucked it into his robe pocket.

"I don't know," he responded, just as quietly. "Not yet. I'll have to think about it. After all, I don't intend to stop pushing for an end to the discrimination against werewolves. I don't want to alienate Scrimgeour—Merlin knows this would be an easier battle with him on our side—but I think I'm going to end up doing it anyway."

Draco half-closed his eyes and shook his head. "Sometimes I think you should act more Slytherin, Harry," he murmured. "Couldn't you just promise him that you won't push right now, and then do it later? Or offer him a compromise, a trade, doing something he'll want in exchange for his softening anti-werewolf laws?"

"Both of those would only make him distrust me more in the end," Harry pointed out. "And I don't think he'd believe me, anyway. He knows me, and he's an honest politician. We have an honest Minister at last, Draco, someone who really does want the Ministry to do what it's supposed to do." I just never thought one of the things he wanted the Ministry to do would be this.

"Trust you to find the one honest politician in Britain, Harry." Draco shook his head in mock regret. Then he reached out and clenched his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'll help you."

That he didn't specify what he would help with made the offer more precious to Harry. He lifted his hand and squeezed back, enjoying Draco's look of delighted surprise. It still wasn't often that Harry made a move to return one of his touches. "Thank you, Draco."

They went to their room then, and Harry felt contented for the half minute it took him to identify the stink of a Dungbomb. Several Dungbombs, probably. He put a hand over his nose and stared at his bed, which was soaked with the odor and the remains of the bombs. A mocking message floated above the bed, written in green letters that Harry couldn't help comparing to the light that created the Dark Mark and Avada Kedavra.

Welcome to a world without house elves, Potter!

Harry sighed, then coughed as the odor infiltrated his lungs. He supposed he should have expected something like this. Conversations and odd looks were not enough to express some of the students' antipathy towards him, and all the Howlers so far had come from outside the school. He cast several spells to remove the odor and clean the sheets, then paused and eyed his bed thoughtfully. The mocking message vanished along with the rest as he considered the idea that had just come into his head, and reconsidered his conversation with Millicent from this morning.

Yes. Why not? I'm a wizard.

Harry—Regulus complained in his head.

Harry shook his head at him. You were the one who said that people who didn't want to use simple cleaning charms were a lot of pompous windbags.

He sat on the bed, and only then turned to face Draco. To his surprise, Draco's hands were locked into fists, and he was shaking.

"If I knew who did this, I'd kill them," he whispered.

Harry rolled his eyes and leaned back, sniffing carefully. No, no trace of the odor. That spell would do nicely, he thought. "It was just a Dungbomb, Draco. Or Dungbombs. And a message. That's all."

"But it must have been one of the older Slytherin students," Draco insisted, sitting down on his own bed with a thunderous frown. "They're the only ones who would have a chance of access to our rooms."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't think so, not for certain," he said, thinking of the Weasley twins. "Listen, Draco, it's all right—"

"It is not." Draco lunged upright and glared at him. "You shouldn't have to endure this treatment!"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "But I asked to endure it, didn't I, with that article? Complaining about it would only let people see that it bothers me. Besides, they gave me an idea. Don't you want to hear what it is?"

Draco paused for a long moment, obviously conflicted between that and the need to keep urging revenge on Harry, and finally said, grumpily, "Yes."

"I'm going to put a ward around my bed so that no house elves can touch my things," said Harry firmly. "Then I'll use cleaning spells on my own sheets and robes, and care for my own part of the room." He concentrated, remembering the blue cage of light he'd used on Dobby when he first met him, and one of them sprang into being around his bed. Harry stretched out a hand and passed it through the barrier, which didn't hinder him at all. He smiled at Draco's stunned expression. "Humans can still get to it, but no house elves."

"But why are you doing this?"

"Because I do depend on house elves for plenty of things I can do myself, and I really shouldn't." Harry squinted thoughtfully at the ceiling of his four-poster. "I'm not sure what to do about things like the torches and the fires and the meals. I can't cook very well, and

conjured filled isn't very filling. And I can't insist that everyone else light their own fires and so on just because I want to live that way."

"But don't you expect me to do it?"

Harry frowned at Draco. "Of course not. Why would I? This is my decision, but you know that you're free to do whatever you want. That's always been true, Draco."

Draco climbed into his bed and tugged his curtains shut. Harry hesitated, thinking about calling out to him, but in the end he shook his head and let it go. He was more exhausted than he had realized he would be. Dealing with the Howlers and the stares and the conversations and this prank was enough without dealing with an angry Draco as well, angry for one of those reasons that Harry had to just leave him to be angry about, because Draco would bounce back from it more easily than Harry could understand it.

Usually, at least.

Harry ran his last words through his head again, and then sighed. I said he could do whatever he wanted. He probably imagined that I was implying some sort of disregard for him with that, like it doesn't matter to me what he does.

This normal thing is hard. There's so much I don't understand about what normal people want and think and need.

Harry hesitated a long moment, and then climbed out of his bed and padded over to Draco's. A tug on the curtains revealed a startled and blinking Draco, trying to muster a scowl and not succeeding very well.

"Listen," said Harry, leaning on one of the bedposts so he could study Draco. "I didn't mean you don't matter to me. You do matter." Terror crawled up his spine, but he managed to go on. "I was thinking the other day about what it meant to me that Snape might have used compulsion on you on purpose. I got angry."

"You always do that when you think about compulsion." But Draco had inched a little nearer the edge of the bed and was looking at him intently.

"But I got angrier than usual," said Harry. "Angrier than I would have—" "Merlin, this is hard. "If he'd used it on Millicent or Neville or Luna," he finished in a rush. "I thought you should know that. What you do matters to me." That was easier, because he'd already said it. "You're more important to me than a lot of people, Draco. I don't know if I should want it to be like that, since I'm supposed to give equal weight to everyone, but that's the way it is." Harry looked away, tense and miserable. It was true, but he often wondered what it meant, that he gave Draco preferment in the way he'd once given Connor. At least he'd known that putting his brother before so many other people was right, and permissible. Here, he was floundering along on a muddy road, and he knew some of his allies would be displeased with him for thinking of Draco first, before them.

Draco reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. Harry hunched before he could help himself. It felt too intimate right after he'd made a confession like this, too much like something he wanted.

Draco pulled his hand back. "Thank you, Harry," he said softly.

Harry didn't have empathy, but there was no mistaking the depth of gratitude in those three words. He nodded and walked back to his bed, climbing into it and leaning his head back. He was more exhausted than before.

He had to wake up and face another day like this tomorrow. And, from certain stern glances he'd got today, Harry was pretty sure that Dumbledore would break his long silence and approach him about the article soon. And now he'd started doubting that what he'd done was the right course, after all. Perhaps he should have waited to launch an article like that.

Harry closed his eyes. I'm so tired.

Then go to sleep. Regulus's voice was gentle. Nothing to hurt you here.

Harry remembered his scar, but he was so exhausted—as much by the thought of the future as by the thought of the present—that he curled up and took Regulus's advice.

Interlude: Son of Mine

February 22nd, 1995

Dear Harry:

It's quiet here. I don't think I've ever realized how quiet. Snow is melting from the fall we had last night, and I can hear the drops of water coasting down the sides of the house in between my own heartbeats.

I could liven up the silence, but I find I don't want to. I sit and look out the windows for at least half an hour each morning, using the sight to relax me and fortify my mind for the day. Even in the winter, Lux Aeterna is beautiful: a stern place, of stone and sere grass, but shining like a mountain. I almost don't want to look away from the sight of the courtyards and the yew trees all draped in snow.

Then I go up to the study, and write any letters I need to, and begin reading. I've ordered books on modern Auror training and the history of the last ten years from Flourish and Blotts. I said once that I wanted to become an Auror again, join the fight against Voldemort, but it's painfully obvious that I can't do that until I know what they do differently now. Ten years of ignoring the outside world left me woefully behind, and the official Ministry pamphlets are no help at all. (They never were. They trick trainees in by promising them a life of fame and respect without mentioning all the hard work. Half the wizards and witches I trained with never made it past the first two months).

It's fascinating work, though hard. I practice the dueling spells by myself, and it's a good thing that some of my study includes healing spells. Not only are they useful in the field, they help me when I'm recovering from a hex bounced off one of my own shields.

Precisely at noon, the brownies serve me a light lunch; this never varies. Then I go flying outside. It's the active equivalent of the staring I do in the morning, I think. It suspends me in chill air above the grounds, which are all white and silver metal laid out below me. February changes this country more than any other month. I find it

hard to hold on to any discouraging thoughts that might have crept in during my morning study, like ones mocking my hope of becoming an Auror again at all.

Then I return to my study, though usually I spend more time with history in the afternoon. A light tea comes at two, and dinner at five o'clock. Then I write until I go to bed.

I'm not sure I should tell you what I'm writing yet. It might sound wrong. But this is a description of my daily routine, which I wrote because I didn't know what else to write.

Sincerely,

James Potter.

February 24th, 1995

Dear James:

Thank you for the description of your day. This is the kind of thing I want to know about you: simple, seemingly nonsensical things that will give me a glimpse into who you are when you're not trying to just be a father to Connor and me.

I could try to give you the same courtesy, but it would be silly because my days are so varied. I wake up at almost the same time every day, eat breakfast, go to class, eat lunch, go to more classes, and eat dinner. Those are usually the only things that are remotely the same. Oh, and Draco's always with me. That's the same, too.

Sometimes I study. Sometimes I teach lessons. Sometimes I have tense conversations that usually teach me more about the other person than they learn about me by the time they're done. Sometimes I free magical creatures. Lately it seems I've spent a lot of time listening to people complain about their love lives. Connor complains to me about his girlfriend, and Blaise moans that his girlfriend is too temperamental—she's a Weasley, and she stands up

to him as well as her brothers—and Hermione rattles on at me about her jealous boyfriend. I offer advice that they never take. Of course, perhaps I'm not in the best position to be offering advice, but they act as if they want it. Mine mostly consists of being honest, which is too hard for most of them, and, Merlin knows, nearly too hard for me most of the time.

I want to know what you write every evening after dinner.

Sincerely,

Harry.

March 1st, 1995

Dear Harry:

I'm sorry for the delay in responding. I found myself nervous, and hesitated for a long time before I wrote anything at all. That's a joke, considering how much I write every day anyway, until my hand cramps, but it's the truth.

I write about you and Connor. I want to put down all the memories I have of you. Sometimes I just make lists: what I remember you doing on your birthdays, how fast you two could run, how many books were in your room at Godric's Hollow. Sometimes I try to cast the memories into a story, so that someone looking over my shoulder could read it as if it happened very far away and long ago. (The longest, and the one I'm proudest of, is a retelling of a wizarding legend with the two of you as the heroes).

Sometimes I think about everything I've forgotten, and then try to remember it. Those entries are the messiest, and they degenerate into a scrawl quickly. I usually give up on them and go to bed early on those nights.

Is it all right to ask how you feel about the newspaper articles? I know the Daily Prophet won't stop yammering about you.

Sincerely,

James Potter.

March 4th, 1995

Dear James:

Thank you for telling me. I don't know if you would like to show me the book that you've written those memories in, or even if I would like to read it, but it helps to know that someone is writing down the memories of our childhoods.

Yes, the newspaper articles are annoying, but I'm bearing up under them. Really, they're more tiresome than anything else. The Howlers are worse, but even they are more tiresome than not. People have a perfect right to object to me, and who could stop them? I can see why some people think I'm taking the glory away from Connor.

Connor doesn't think I'm taking anything away, though. He scowls when most people mention the Tournament, so they shut up. Or perhaps that's pity for him having been laid up in the hospital wing for so long. I don't know for certain. Perhaps I shall mention that possibility to him and see where it leads.

Fewer people speak to me about their love lives, now. Connor is still dancing around Parvati Patil, but Zacharias and Hermione had an argument that ended with her slapping him, and Ginny Weasley hexed Blaise for one remark too many about her brothers. Finally, some peace!

What do you dream about?

Sincerely,

Harry.

March 8th, 1995

Dear Harry:

I dream about a lot of things.

At night, I mostly dream nonsense. I always did. I know that some people have the most amazing, connected, story-like dreams, but that's not a gift I possess. The other night there were wooden gargoyles chasing me while I wielded a diamond sword. The night before that, I was trying desperately to find a box that would keep me from turning into a cat, and I know there were also dragons in there somewhere, but it's as much as I remember.

During the day, I concentrate on my ambitions of becoming an Auror again. The more I learn, the more it seems I have to learn. I'm studying law now. How many edicts did the Ministry pass in the last ten years, anyway? And do they really expect all their Aurors to be conversant with every single one of them? Sometimes it seems that way.

When writing, I dream about you and Connor.

Sweet dreams, Harry.

Sincerely,

James Potter.

March 15th, 1995

Dear James:

Now it's my turn to be nervous about writing you a letter, but I thought I owed you this much honesty for being so honest with me. I dream quite a lot, and I can't remember the last time I had a normal one. Or maybe I do have normal ones, and they just shred before I wake up.

I keep having visions of the Dark Lord. I see him—or, at least, I see the place where he's sitting—and his Death Eaters. So far, it's an advantage, because I can hear his plans, and he doesn't seem to notice me. But listening to his voice is disgusting. When I wake, my scar bleeds and my head hurts. It happens every single time, and I can't account for it. You'd think I'd get used to it at some point. At least I'm tolerating the headaches now. You should hear Draco fuss about them. It quite fulfils my quota of pointless fussing for the day.

Not that anyone else believes I've reached that quota. Blaise apologized to Ginny, and now they're happy again, so he complains about Ron almost hexing him in the corridors. Parvati said something cutting to Connor, so he mopes at me. The only really amusing romance is watching Zacharias try to take a seat at Hermione's table in the library without her noticing him. He waits until she's deep in a book and then sneaks over. She always notices him and moves. It's like a very slow game of musical chairs.

I'm not sure why I'm everyone's romantic woe repository. Perhaps because I listen well?

Is the landscape around Lux Aeterna changing now that there's less snow?

Sincerely,

Harry.

March 17th, 1995

Dear Harry:

Have you been to see Madam Pomfrey about your headache or your scar bleeding? I'm honored that you gave me your confidence about your visions, so I know that I have no right to press you, but if she could help you at all... I don't like to think of you suffering.

The landscape around Lux Aeterna looks oddly fragile right now. The first bits of grass are stirring, but they always get buried again by a faint snowfall or a frantic rain. The severe gray and silver grids are gone. The landscape wavers back and forth between mud and dirt. I remember loving this time of year when I was a boy. It made me think that spring was coming every day.

I changed into Prongs and ran today along the beach where we performed the Midsummer ritual. I'd forgotten how much I love running as a stag. The sheer song of the wind in my ears and the weight of antlers on my head and scent in my nostrils is something I should really always remember when I change back to human, but I don't.

Afraid I can't help you much on the romantic front! I was always the one who poured out his woes into other people's ears. Remus was the one who had to hear them.

Sincerely,

James Potter.

March 22nd, 1995

Dear James:

You've probably heard about my having a bunch of snakes come into the Great Hall and hiss at people by now. But they're free. Free, and I shattered the web on them! And it was a great day in other respects, too. Regulus came back! And something else happened that, well, it's important, but I think I'd rather hold the joy to myself for a while yet, because it still makes me nervous.

There's so much beauty in the world, Dad.

Did you perform a special Light ritual for the birth of spring?

Sincerely,

Harry.

March 27th, 1995

Dear Harry:

Thank you very much for your last letter, Harry. It means the world to me to know that you're happy.

For the birth of spring, there is a ritual, but it's one that each member of a Light family has to perform by himself. It's silence around the moment of sunset, when there's equal Light and Dark, day and night, for a single poised instant of time. For that moment, we remember the ancient time when Light and Dark didn't war with each other. We're dedicated to our Declared side the rest of the year, but we can pause and step outside the year just once.

I performed that ritual on the beach, too, and though it shouldn't have felt silent with the sea sighing and crashing all around me and gulls screaming in my ears, the absence of a single human voice really did matter.

I hope you continue happy.

Sincerely,

James Potter.

April 4th, 1995

Dear James:

I suppose you've heard about my article by now, and the attack on the Ministry prison. I dreamed about it, but I couldn't warn anyone in time to prevent it. I thought the article would be a good first step, but now I'm getting pelted by Howlers and Dungbombs.

I'm cleaning my own clothes and blankets now, because I thought it would set a good example to not have house elves serving me. (They're all up in arms about house elves—most of the people I've upset, I mean. I didn't foresee that). I haven't decided what to do about meals yet.

I never realized that I would upset everyone so much. That wasn't my intention. Some discomfort if they fought against me, sure, but I thought I could approach them on rational ground. Apparently not.

A few Slytherins are urging me to retract the article, but I won't. I do think I need a little time to recover, though. I'm so exhausted with dealing with everyone every day that I need a place where no one can come up to me and start a debate on the morals of freeing house elves. And being away from the romantic fits would be a fringe benefit.

Could I come to Lux Aeterna for Easter?

Sincerely,

Harry.

April 6th, 1995

Dear Harry:

You are more than welcome here. I am proud of you for standing up what you believe in, but I can understand the need to retreat for a few weeks and build up your tolerance for stupidity.

Connor has already written and told me he'd come, because he wants to give me a piece of his mind. Whether for that or any other reason, I am always happy to have you near me.

Sincerely,

James Potter.

Chapter Fifty-Two: Walking on Eggshells

Harry stretched his hands above his head, and tried to ignore Draco's gaze burning on the side of his face.

"When were you planning to tell me about this?" Draco's voice pushed at him, demanding his notice. Harry looked down at his toast instead, and started eating as though it were the most interesting meal he'd ever had. In a sense, it was. He didn't think he'd ever eaten another meal with Draco staring at him quite that hard.

"A bit later," said Harry, and cast a Tempus charm with one hand, pleased that the wandless magic obeyed him so easily. It is much more convenient to have it come through my fingers than my shoulders or my eyes or my feet or wherever it likes. "In about two hours, actually."

Draco hesitated a moment, caught flat-footed by Harry's admission. Harry kept on eating. He refused to feel bad about Draco's reaction. It wasn't Harry's fault that Blaise had noticed Harry packing his trunk while Draco was in the loo and opened his mouth about it when he came out. Then Draco had asked Harry where he was going for Easter, and Harry had said that he was going to Lux Aeterna, with perfect truth. Draco hadn't asked why before starting to fire other angry questions, so he might as well put up with the inconvenience of Harry answering calmly and when he wanted to.

Draco grabbed his wrist. Harry turned and looked at him. Draco's eyes were blazing. That's unusual, Harry thought, leaning back enough that the hold on his wrist didn't hurt. He normally doesn't show emotion that way, but through the flushing of his cheeks and the way he sits in his chair.

"I want to know why you're doing this, Harry," Draco said.

"You'll know in two hours." Harry tugged lightly on his hand, but Draco wouldn't give it up. Harry shrugged and returned to eating. "I was planning to tell you and Snape about it at the same time, and I don't see any reason to change that plan."

Draco was silent for a long time. Then he said, in a voice so low Harry had to strain his ears even though he was leaning close, "I thought you wanted to come back to the Manor with me."

"You didn't ask," said Harry quietly, even as the toast turned to a sticky little lump in his stomach. "I would have told you the truth if you'd asked, Draco, though I still would have wanted to wait to explain my reasons. You just assumed I was coming with you, and now you're upset because I messed up your schedule."

"That's not the only reason." Draco brushed the back of his hand across Harry's cheek, and Harry shivered, because that wasn't playing fair, damn it. "How can you think that's the only reason?"

Great, Harry thought in dismay. Now he'd hurt Draco, when the whole reason he'd waited was so that he wouldn't have to. He was going back to Lux Aeterna for Easter, with Connor, and he wouldn't bring Draco or Snape along. He was going to tell them both at once on the last day of term, so quickly that their major emotion towards him was anger and not hurt. If Blaise had kept his big mouth shut, then everything would have been fine.

A post owl appeared with another Howler at that moment, and Harry had never been so glad to see a distraction. He reached out with his free hand to accept the letter, which began yelling at him about the dangerous irresponsibility of a boy of fourteen wielding such power.

Harry's determination to get away increased as he listened to it. The major reason was peace, just as he'd written James. He'd been inundated with so many insults and pranks that they had started to blur together in his memory, which normally never happened. He wanted a place where he could take some deep breaths unhindered, and Lux Aeterna was that place, from James's letters: quiet and peaceful, stern and austere, with wards that no Howlers could get through.

But the other reason had taken root in his mind two days after he had Skeeter release the article, as he received more and more evidence that moving so boldly, and in a way that impinged on so many people's lives, was a mistake. He had to switch tactics. He knew a

way to do that, a way that would draw on him and a few people who might want to help him, no one else. It had several steps, and the first one he could only accomplish by going to Lux Aeterna.

However, he was almost certain that neither Draco nor Snape would let him go through with the tactics switch, because they would worry he was endangering himself. There was a simple solution to that. He was not going to tell them he was doing it. The decision had seemed so simple to him when he was lying in bed the night he made it, aiming for a greater goal and stepping over a few obstacles in the way.

But he was being reminded now that Draco wasn't an obstacle, but a human being who, Merlin knew why, loved him, and was listening to the Howler with an expression that truly frightened Harry.

Harry turned his head away, and pretended that his upset came from the insults when Draco asked him.

Draco had dragged Harry to Snape's office immediately after Potions—it was a half day of classes—and settled him on one of the Transfigured chairs with a forbidding expression. Harry nodded and faced his guardian, who already looked grim.

"It is obvious that you have something to say to me, Harry," he said. "The way you were squirming throughout class rather confirmed it. Now."

Harry nodded again. "Draco already knows this," he said. He had decided that he could get through this best if he adopted an expression and tone of gentle regret. It was perfectly true that he regretted hurting them. It was also perfectly true that that wasn't going to stop him from staying with James for Easter holidays. "I'm going to Lux Aeterna for Easter."

Snape's nostrils flared like a Grim's scenting prey, but he simply inclined his head, as though the news had not been unexpected. His voice was clipped, staccato. "Why?"

"I need some peace," said Harry, and made a vague gesture that he knew would encompass the Howlers and the pranks and the rest of it

in both Draco's and Snape's minds. "I didn't know what I was doing with this article. I admit that."

Snape tilted his head to the side. "I knew you were calling a storm," he murmured. "I did not anticipate all the winds."

Harry nodded back. Snape had listened to him when he complained and offered him dueling lessons to distract him from his troubles, but he hadn't mentioned a desire to ignite the people who sent the Howlers and the Dungbombs like Draco had. Snape thought he should know the consequences of his own mistakes, Harry knew. "And Lux Aeterna is peaceful. It keeps letters out if my father doesn't want them to come in, and I know that he'd keep the Howlers away from me. And it's a very different environment from school. That's what I need most of all."

"It was not peaceful this summer," said Snape quietly, "when I rescued you from the Blood-Burning Curse."

Harry sighed and bowed his head. "I know. I've learned my lesson, sir. I don't intend to venture outside the wards this time."

"Nor was it peaceful inside the house," Snape went on, with a mildness that Harry was coming to fear more than his sharpness, "where your father and your brother sent you into a near-frenzy."

Harry shrugged. "This time, James knows more about me. We've been writing back and forth. He's changed now, I think. I was the one who suggested coming home for Easter. He never would have said anything about it, because he promised not to. It'll be awkward in close quarters, but awkward's a lot better than the closeness he thought we had and which I feigned this summer."

"A man may appear one thing in letters," Snape murmured, "and another when you actually meet him."

Harry let out his breath. "I know that, sir. But I really think he has changed. Connor's still angry with him—"

"I thought you said you needed peace," Draco interrupted him. "This doesn't sound like you'll get any, if your brother's going to be yelling at your father." He'd taken Harry's wrist again, and stroked it in small, soothing circles.

"I talked to Connor yesterday." Harry could still see his twin's hazel eyes widening in surprise when Connor realized that he intended to come home, and why. "He said that he would make sure not to yell at James in front of me. Really, what they need is to clear the air. A big fight, and they'll be back on the road to healing, although not quite there yet. They've talked to each other in letters except for James's visit to the hospital wing after the Second Task, and then Connor was still weak and woozy from his wound. Once they can see each other and have a long talk, or maybe shouting match, then they should be able to—"

"Harry."

Harry jumped. He'd actually forgotten Snape, occupied both with memories of what Connor had said to him and with Draco rubbing his wrist. He glanced up and found his guardian leaning forward, watching him with eyes that made Harry drop his gaze at once. Snape was simply too good a Legilimens. He might enter Harry's mind without even realizing it and spy out his hidden motive, and then there would be no way he would let Harry go.

"I do not care that much about your brother," Snape said. "I still want to know how this visit will affect you, whether you think it is a wise thing. You need peace, but I could give that to you. I did so this summer." He lifted his chin slightly, as though daring Harry to deny it.

Harry swallowed. That does sound wonderful. That August, bar Rosier's attempt to kill him at the beginning of it and the kidnapping at the end of it, lingered in his mind as one of the best times of his life. He knew he could relax here, that he would sleep more deeply than usual, and that he might actually be able to forget about the article and the shame of the mess he'd created—

But then he remembered the Howlers, and sighed. "I'd still get a barrage of post each day," he pointed out, lifting his eyes to Snape's.

"You told me that you couldn't ward me against Rosier's letters reaching me, sir, without driving post owls away altogether. That means that you couldn't ward against Howlers either, could you?"

Snape slowly shook his head.

"Malfoy Manor has the necessary precautions, Harry," said Draco. He'd leaned against Harry by now, and Harry wondered what it meant that he hadn't even noticed Draco's face so close to his. "You could receive ordinary post there, but not Howlers. And you know that the wards will let you through." He touched the back of Harry's neck. "And we'd be together there."

"With your parents," Harry pointed out, tamping down on the little cry of loss that wanted to rip out of him. "I'm more uneasy around your father than I am around my own."

"He would stay away from you if you wanted," Draco promised. "He's your formal ally now, Harry, and that's a small request. Besides, he's busy with some secret project of his own, always bustling in and out of the house. And I know that you don't mind my mother."

Harry felt his resolve waver. A holiday with Draco and Narcissa when I'm not out of my mind with pain. Merlin, that sounds wonderful. I want to.

But though that would give him the rest he needed, it wouldn't move him a step towards his final project, his more important goal, of switching tactics so that he could actually free the magical creatures without stamping on so many wizards' free will.

This is stupid, Regulus snarled in his head. Harry, for Merlin's sake, no one expects you to solve the problem of the magical creatures tomorrow. They've been imprisoned for centuries. Go to Malfoy Manor and relax. If James has really altered, he won't mind if you change your mind.

Harry ground his teeth. Are you ready to tell me about the journal yet?

Regulus gave another snarl, this one wordless.

Harry nodded back. You don't want to talk about that, and I don't want to talk about this. So be quiet. He glanced back at Snape and Draco. Draco had a hopeful look on his face. Snape's was closed, and his eyes held nothing but blankness.

"I do not think that this is a good idea, Harry," he said.

"I do." Harry kept his voice firm, and as gentle as he could. He turned to face Draco, who was blinking as he realized that he wouldn't be able to persuade Harry to come to the Manor after all. "I promise, this isn't a reflection on you. Neither of you. I just want to step away for a while, into a different place, and think about different things. I'll come back the stronger for it."

"With a man who abused you," Draco said. "I don't call that a different place, Harry, or one likely to make you stronger."

Harry felt the fretful panic lash at him again. "Draco, you said—"

"I promised about your mother, Harry," Draco said. "Not about James. Let's be honest, here, the way you're always telling me we need to be." He met Harry's eyes squarely. "I think you'll come back broken."

"I am willing to trust Harry when he says he will not."

Harry gave Snape a quick, grateful glance, but his guardian's face had not altered. Nor had his opinion, as he proved when he added, "If he comes back broken because of something James did, then he will not see James Potter again."

Harry opened his mouth, then ducked his head. I can't blame him for saying that. Besides, argue too much, and he might think there's something I want to see there beyond James.

"Thank you for trusting me," he said, and then glanced at Draco.

Draco's face wavered several times, before he looked away. Harry squeezed his shoulder. "Draco, I promise I'll come back. Trust me?"

"I do," Draco whispered. "But sometimes I think you trust yourself too much. You might try to bear more than you really can."

"Connor's going to be there, and he wants to yell at James," Harry pointed out. "He should protect me."

And I will be there, too, said Regulus in the depths of his mind. If I cannot persuade you out of this, I will at least go along and make sure nothing too terrible happens.

Draco muttered something about Connor not being able to protect a fly from spiders, then sighed. "I understand," he said. "Come back safe." He gave Harry a quick, rough hug, but pulled away when he tried to return it, and trotted out the door. Harry understood. His empathy as well as his own emotions would be telling him there was no chance for Harry to change his mind, and he wanted to deal with his disappointment in private.

"I do wonder, sometimes," said Snape, his voice gone remote, "if Draco is right, if you subject yourself to pressures that you cannot bear."

Harry faced him. I can't give up now, not when I'm so close to winning my goal. "Does that mean that you'll forbid me to go after all, sir?"

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Of course not, Harry. I trust you, as I said. I was merely echoing an interesting observation." His eyes locked on Harry's face for a moment. "I doubt Draco realizes how interesting it is."

Harry looked away. Snape had been much better lately—dueling with him, not mentioning his family at all, quietly giving him headache potions when he awakened from another vision. But there were moments like this when he would go quiet and thoughtful, and the things he said made Harry feeling as if he were looking straight at Harry's heart and soul.

"Thank you, sir," he said, choosing to respond to one part of Snape's declaration and not the other, and then slipped out the door.

This has to be the right thing to do, he thought, as he made for the Slytherin common room and his trunk. He would join Connor in the hospital wing, and they would Floo to Lux Aeterna from there. I made a mistake. I see that now. I'm going to make up for that.

Your priorities disturb me, Regulus said at him, but sulked when Harry brought up the image of the journal again. He'd refused to say anything about it, retreating into a stubborn silence that had a strong tint of shame. Harry decided that he could wait until Regulus was ready to speak. For now, he seemed safe, and Harry believed him when he said that he still had no idea where his body was, and that the journal could provide no clues to that.

Snape leaned back against his desk and followed Harry's departure with his eyes, in silence. Harry was hiding something, he was almost certain of it, but he had trained the boy too well. Harry could raise the Occlumency shields without thinking now, and they kept almost all of his emotions in check and a good portion of his motives. Snape would have pushed, and Harry would have felt it, and that would be another chipping away at the trust between them.

Snape was willing to wait. He did trust Harry, but he did not have quite the same level of blithe trust in his ward's ability to recover from shattering events. Harry seemed to think that because he survived, that made everything all right, without realizing that suppurating wounds were not, in general, a sign of good health.

And if Harry had stewed and brooded on that article, as Snape knew he had, then he would almost certainly have come up with some plan to use instead of it, or, as Harry would conceive of it, to make up for his stumble. And if he was not telling them about that plan, it was risky or dangerous or both.

Snape clenched his hands. I promised. I will wait. I will hold back. He needs an adult he can trust absolutely.

But let him return in pain from any abuse or neglect, and I meant what I said. He need not concern himself with James Potter again. Nor will I kill him, though I am sure Harry would fear that I meant that.

Snape's gaze went to the innocent-looking desk in the back corner of his office. One drawer held the Pensieve Potion. Another held rolls of parchment covered in close writing. Another contained books.

I have my weapons. I need not use them if there is no need, but I have them ready if there is.

James wiped his hands on his robes. It was the fourth time in five minutes. They were so sweaty that if a troll had appeared in Lux Aeterna's waiting room at that moment and charged him waving its club, James wouldn't have been able to fumble his wand up to react in time.

His sons were coming through the fireplace in a few minutes. Harry and Connor were coming home.

He'd wanted to go to Hogwarts and meet them, but Connor had sent him a letter that forbade even the possibility of that, and James was not anxious to push. His letter-writing in the last month and a half had been an exercise in holding back, in not mentioning Snape, or Lily, or the past, or anything that might hurt or anger Harry or Connor. Surely, now that he was finally going to see his boys again, he could exercise a bit more patience.

It was harder than he thought. James supposed the letters and the writing he'd done had moved him closer to Harry and Connor in a way that neither could appreciate yet, because it was all in his own mind. He would remember that. He would be conscious of that this time. Too much of the pain in the past had resulted from his ignoring what he should have paid attention to. This time, he would wait for one of his sons to make the first move, and when they did, then he would let his own moves be guided by theirs.

The fireplace flickered to life, and the flames glowed green. James took a deep breath, as much to reassure himself he wasn't hyperventilating as to be ready to say something when Harry and Connor stepped out of the fireplace.

Harry came first, springing adroitly out of the hearth and over the slight step that might have tripped him. He whirled his trunk out of the way, dusted soot from his robes with one hand, and still had the other

free to help Connor as his brother stumbled out, coughing and choking.

James swallowed. He discovered that he wasn't ready after all. He'd dreamed of his sons at all different ages throughout the late winter and early spring, but it was nothing to seeing them now, turning and looking up at him as the teenagers they really were at this point.

Well, Harry's eyes are nothing like a teenager's, James corrected himself, as he noticed the glaze of exhaustion on Harry's face, and the deep circles beneath his eyes. They never were, really.

He held out a hand, not ready yet to risk an embrace, and Harry took it. "Welcome to Lux Aeterna," James said, not quite daring to call it "home" either. "Do you want the room that you had this summer?"

Harry smiled at him, which was a much more pleasant expression than he'd worn in a lot of the ways James had imagined this moment. "Thank you, that'd be fine," he said. "I'm very tired, and I'm going to lie down and go to sleep right away, if it's all the same to you."

James nodded. His self-consciousness felt awkward, but this was still so much better than he'd done with Harry during the summer. "Of course. I do think that you'll find you have a visitor soon."

Harry paused, so arrested that James felt a bit bad for trying to make it a surprise. He's trying to figure out who it is, what he'll have to do to deal with it. "Who?" Harry asked at last.

"Fawkes," said James. "He showed up here yesterday, and he's been flying the grounds most of the time, singing. But he spent the night in your room, and I think he'll be happy to see you."

Harry blinked in wonder. "I—yes, and I'd like to see him." He smiled at James. "Thank you." He dragged his trunk out of the room without waiting for anything else. James watched him go for a moment, then turned to face Connor.

The moment he saw his younger son's face, he had a good idea why Harry hadn't wanted to wait around. James swallowed. Connor glared

at him. In some ways, Connor looked more like him than Harry did, and eye color was a minute part of it. James knew, very well, that expression of mulish stubbornness. It was the kind he'd seen in mirrors just before battles. Connor didn't intend to abandon this battlefield, that much was certain.

James nodded at him. "Hello, Connor," he said.

"Oh, that's a good beginning," said Connor, and James flinched. He'd only heard Connor use that sarcasm on a few occasions. Most of the time, he didn't need it. He'd been an indulged child, and he tended to get his way by fussing or yelling—straightforward, honest anger. Harry was the one who'd had the tongue dipped in acid, or at least James had thought that when he allowed himself to notice anything strange in his elder son's behavior. "At least you're not going to pretend that I'm a statue or a chess piece. What, got tired of having one of them to pick up and move around?" Connor's eyes flickered in the direction Harry had gone.

James stiffened. That was unfair. "He and I have been much better to each other," he said. "It's the reason he agreed to come home. And—"

"But see," Connor cut in, "I don't trust you."

James flinched again, more sharply this time. He had not imagined that Connor would say the words, nor that they would cut so deep.

"You've changed your mind before, apparently." Connor's eyes were narrowed, steady with something that James thought was dislike. "You were going to be different when Harry was in the hospital wing second year, and then you weren't. You changed your mind at the end of term last year, and then you slipped right back into hurting Harry and insulting Snape. Oh, yeah, some of it wasn't deliberate, but a lot was. And then you didn't write Harry for months and months, just because you were childish enough to want him to write you first. And then you wanted to start over again. But how do I know that this is the real starting over this time? Maybe you'll collapse again and run like you did after—after Harry took Mum's magic away." Connor took a deep breath, and the soul-deep horror in his eyes sliced off another

piece of James's heart. "Do you even know what that was like?" Connor whispered. "You don't. You just ran. Harry had a reason for leaving, but you didn't. You should have stayed and helped me."

"Connor—" James began.

"But this isn't even about me," said Connor, pulling himself back together again with a snap. James felt another pang, that both of his sons had had to learn to do that. "It's about Harry." His eyes burned as he took a step forward. "This had better be real, this change of your mind. You'd better want what's best for him. You'd better not let something happen to him through negligence. Frankly, I think I have to be more afraid of that than of you hurting him on purpose, though after you brought charges against Snape, I don't know that for certain."

James bowed his head. "I didn't—I didn't realize that affected you so deeply," he whispered.

"Harry's never talked to me about it," said Connor. "He knows that Snape and I don't get along. But of course it affected me. He's my brother. And I've made plenty of stupid mistakes in the past, but I've changed my mind now, and I'm not some stuffed toy that he has to protect, either. I can protect him back." He paused for a moment, breath heaving in and out of his lungs, and then added, "And I will. Protect him back, I mean. Harry's too Slytherin, sometimes, and way too forgiving. He'll hold back and try to placate someone who wants to hurt him, to see if he can calm them down and get out of the situation. That's why it's a good thing I'm in Gryffindor. I can just launch a good, hard hex if there's need."

James let out a breath that seemed to catch at several places in his throat. Then he nodded. He was sadder, and prouder of Connor, than he could say. "I know," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

Connor studied him for a moment, then nodded in turn. "I hope that'll be good enough this time," he said quietly. "That's another way I'm not as good as Harry is. He just keeps giving people chances, you know? But it's more limited with me. And a damn good thing, too. Sometimes you have to stop forgiving people."

James smiled at him and said, helpless to stop it, "I'm so glad you've grown up this way, Connor."

Connor blinked twice, then relaxed with a huge whoof of air. "Good," he said, and his speech wavered for the first time. "I—I do want us to be a family again, Dad. I'd like that. You and me, I mean. I don't think you and Harry can. But I can't do that if I think you're going to hurt him."

"I won't," said James. "I promise it, in Godric's name."

Connor scanned him intently. James looked back, and wondered if Harry really was, all the time, the more complicated of his sons.

"Good," Connor said, and then abruptly stepped forward and hugged him. "I did miss you," he whispered against James's robes.

James slowly, carefully, put his arms around Connor, and thought of him as he'd been the last time he saw him, lying in a hospital bed with bandages swathed all around his chest and belly. "I missed you, too." Harry had barely put his trunk down on the floor of his room when a bright burst of flames coalesced over his pillow, and transformed into Fawkes. Harry put out a hand, smiling, and the phoenix soared over and landed on his shoulder, a warm, comforting weight, nudging him until Harry petted his neck. Fawkes closed his eyes and crooned.

What's he doing? said Regulus abruptly. Go away, bird! I was here first!

Harry blinked. What are you talking about? he asked, but felt it a moment later. While Regulus's presence in his head was limited to a voice and occasional touches on his memories, he could feel a presence of light and heat now. He closed his eyes, and saw a brilliant orange glow behind his eyelids.

For a moment, he panicked, thinking of the phoenix web. But the orange glow was different from the golden one, and Fawkes trilled reassuringly into his ear. Harry relaxed. The warmth spread around his brow, soothing away a tension headache he'd barely noticed he

had, so constant was it now. Harry let out a long breath and sat slowly down on the bed.

I think he's bonding with you, said Regulus in awe.

Harry blinked and tried to move, but the warmth had bound his limbs like the cocoon of sheets that tied him on a lazy summer morning. Then it let him go, and he found himself leaning back against the pillows. Fawkes sat on his shoulder chirping at him, and Harry could see visions in his head when he listened, rather like the images that might form from a vivid piece of music.

He could see Fawkes winging above an unfamiliar sea dotted with brilliant islands. Fawkes dipped and skimmed over one of them, and Harry caught his breath as a woman's head covered with snakes thrust into view. Fawkes sang to her, and though Harry didn't catch a sense of words from the music, he knew that the phoenix was telling her that a vates was abroad in the world. The woman cocked her head as she listened, and the snakes ceased to snap and hiss at each other and lay down tamely.

Fawkes coasted above a wide expanse of sand, and an enormous creature bounded into view. Harry caught his breath. It was a unicorn, he knew that, but its tail streamed out like a lion's instead of a horse's, and its feet revealed multiple hooves on each one, and its horn was black. It reared up challengingly at Fawkes, screaming and trying to stab him with its horn, but Fawkes sang, and implanted a vision of freedom in the unicorn's mind that stayed with it when it lowered its head and began to run again. Fawkes soared along above its back, casting his shadow down to mingle with its and releasing a chorus in praise of stern, proud power.

Fawkes sat on a branch in silence, until a giant leopard prowled beneath his perch, paws shaking the ground with soft thunder. Harry gasped as he recognized a nundu, which could destroy whole villages if it wanted, and which a hundred wizards working together could barely bring down. Fawkes chose a different song, understandably, a darting, trilling thing that made the nundu whirl about, chasing shadows that gradually resolved into an image of the vates. Fawkes vanished in a ball of flames that time. The nundu was

so dangerous that he could only plant the idea in its wild mind and hope it took root eventually.

More and more images, and Harry knew Fawkes had been all over the world, and given the message to more and more magical creatures. There was a vates, and while he might never reach them or free them, they deserved to know that he existed. It might at least bring some hope and make the waiting in confinement easier.

Harry opened his eyes, and let out a long sigh.

It's so big, Regulus said quietly. How can you do this?

Harry shook his head. "I don't know yet," he whispered aloud. "Step by step along the road, I think." He thought of the letter he'd sent to Scrimgeour, proposing that they meet some time after Easter and discuss their differences. It wasn't the perfect solution, but it was a step to a solution. "Bit by bit." He reached up and gently stroked Fawkes's feathers. "I'm honored that you chose to bond with me," he told the phoenix.

Fawkes crooned at him, as if to tell him to stop being silly, and then began the soft song that had lulled Harry to sleep before. Harry smiled, and lowered his head to the pillows, and obliged, taking the seed of hope that Fawkes had meant him to have, rather than the idea of duty.

Harry took a deep breath of wonder. From what James had said in his letters, he'd thought that Lux Aeterna would still be caught up in that muddy vision of half-spring, somewhere between seasons, and that he would see only the most stubborn and earliest of flowers, if any at all.

Instead, Fawkes had led him straight to a flourishing patch of blossoms in a corner of the lawn, flowers with delicate red-gold petals surrounding a blue center. They had shot up through the mud as if disdaining its power to hold them back, and now they rippled and shone like—

Like flames, Harry realized. He touched one of the petals, and found it softly warm. He gave Fawkes a suspicious glance. "You had something to do with this?"

Fawkes lifted with a cry and hovered over the flowers. They twitched and rippled as if called by the wind from his wings, and when Fawkes began to sing, they spun around on their stems, increasing their resemblance to small, dancing fires.

Harry wasn't sure exactly how Fawkes had made the flowers grow, but James had said he was flying over the grounds the day before Harry and Connor arrived. He might have had time to make them grow. Maybe.

Fawkes interrupted his song long enough to give the smooth warble that Harry already recognized as a smug equivalent of I'm a phoenix, therefore I make the impossible possible.

Harry leaned back against the yew standing nearby and enjoyed the song and the flowers, feeling the memory of Howlers crisp away into ash and leave him at peace.

...and they protected each other, and they taught each other, and they lived happily ever after.

Harry very gently closed the book and stared at it a moment. He knew his cheeks were wet, and he was very aware of James's tense, nervous stillness on the other side of the room. He hadn't refused when Harry asked him if he could look at the journal in which he wrote about Harry and Connor each night, but he had hesitated, and hadn't seem that relieved when Harry had told him he'd only wanted to read the retelling of the wizarding legend.

Harry knew the legend, of course, about the wizarding children who had brought the unicorns out of the sun. The original children were brothers, not twin brothers, but the story worked even better when they were. Harry hadn't got used to his name appearing on each

page, along with Connor's. He touched the book's cover as if he were touching something sacred.

Or is it that I haven't got used to knowing James cares enough to write about us like that?

He met his father's eyes, and felt a deep, satisfying lurch somewhere in him, as though something in flight had finally settled. He smiled, and for all that James couldn't possibly have known the reason for it, he smiled back.

We'll be all right, Harry thought in wonder. We really will be. Not father and son, but something else. Even friends, maybe.

Harry woke, slowly, and stretched luxuriously. He'd gone to sleep at seven that evening, tired beyond bearing, and though it was five in the morning now, that still meant he'd got ten hours of sleep. He stood and looked through the window of his bedroom briefly, wondering what Draco was doing.

Probably still dead to the world, he had to admit, as he reached out gently towards his sense of Connor's and James's magic. Still in their bedrooms. What had been an oppressive sense of constant presence during the summer was comforting now, even though he'd only been in Lux Aeterna two days. Draco is not a morning person.

In a way, it would have been a comfort to have Draco with him now. Harry took a sharp breath as he reminded himself why that was impossible. Draco would never have let him do this.

Fawkes let out a soft noise, and settled gently on Harry's shoulder. Harry scratched his neck. The phoenix ducked his head, and rubbed it against the side of Harry's throat.

I suppose that you have to do this, if you're ready, said Regulus reluctantly.

"I'm ready," Harry whispered aloud. "As ready as I'll get. And I want to. I do have to make up for my stumble with the article, but more than that, I want to know more about myself. Snape and Draco help, but they can't force me to be honest with myself, just with them."

Regulus stayed silent, making his opinion quite clear, but Fawkes crooned and took off, soaring ahead of Harry to his bedroom door.

Harry left his room, and went downstairs, and traveled the appropriate corridors, and opened the right door.

In the room before him, glittering, silver-edged, he felt the Maze's alien awareness open one eye.

Chapter Fifty-Three: May The Maze Be Unending

Harry felt sunlight on his face, sunlight shining on his skin, sunlight all around him, as he stepped into the room where the Maze waited. He had seen the artifact before, of course, so he knew what it looked like, but he had never realized, or perhaps just not remembered, that the radiance it shed was this intense.

Or perhaps the radiance really had increased, Harry thought, as he lifted a hand to shield his eyes. Ahead of him, the Maze glittered and twined. The light made it hard to see where one wall slid into another, and Harry no longer thought it looked like a jumper someone had dropped on the floor. It had the look of a restless, surging sea instead, as if he were back on the Northumberland beach and watching the waves dash towards him. The sun somewhat dazzled him and kept him from making out what was foam and what was driftwood, what silver and what white.

On his shoulder, softly, Fawkes began to sing.

The Maze sparked once, as though accepting a reply Harry hadn't been aware he was making, and then some of the silvery lines of light dropped. Harry found that he could walk nearer than he had been able to before, though he still couldn't see very well. He lifted his glasses off and looked at them, but that didn't help, unless he considered his eyes watering an improvement.

He stopped and waited, wondering if he had to give a special signal to approach the Maze. James had spoken of using a mirror and shedding three drops of blood, but in vague terms; he hadn't wanted to reveal much of his time in the Maze, which Harry could understand. Harry could fulfill those conditions easily enough with his magic, if that was what the Maze wanted.

Fawkes's music poured over him, and Harry understood that Fawkes believed the Maze had already accepted, and approved, his intention of approaching it. He did need to show that he was Potter blood, but in the tense, eager awareness the Maze projected towards him, Harry could feel no doubt.

He held up his hand, hardly aware of what he was doing. He felt as if he stood on some high mountain in the sunrise, looking to the east, and the light filled his mind with a golden haze. He felt one of Fawkes's talons score his wrist, and then three drops of blood were shining up at him; he hadn't been aware of starting to bleed, or of the pain. He tilted his hand, and the blood splashed on the floor.

What are you doing, Harry? Regulus whispered.

"I don't know," said Harry honestly, and lifted his head as he saw more of the silvery barriers, invisible until now, fall away like folds of gauze, leaving the Maze in all its unwrapped glory.

His steps were soft as he once more approached. He had considered consequences, endlessly, before he stepped into this room. He had known that he might be gone for months, as James had been, though he didn't really think it likely. According to his father, what had cost him the most time was his refusal to face certain of his mistakes. Harry intended to face them all, as painlessly as he could, because he was willing to accept that he had made them. Besides, he hadn't lived as long as James had, and his life would take less time to relate.

He could die in the Maze if he refused to go on, but that was simple. He would not refuse to go on.

But now, the thought of consequences tumbled away from him. The Maze was a great and living thing, like the sky, like the sea. Harry felt a kind of vertigo sweep him, as if he were about to plunge off a cliff and into the heart of a fall.

Besides, Fawkes continued to sing, quietly, and seemed to think it was quite a good idea for him to go forward.

In that cocoon of music and light, Harry stepped into the Maze. It both was and was not what he had expected, Harry realized. He had known he would be in a tunnel of mirrors, and indeed he was. He had expected a floor beneath his feet and curved walls on either side, and that was the way the Maze was shaped. He had thought images would begin appearing on the walls, and that was what happened.

He had not imagined the slight warmth of the floor beneath his feet, as if he walked on silk instead of metal, or the way that pulses of light raced beside him and then trailed away, like constant small sunrises, or the way that Fawkes's song seemed to soften and calm the extreme edges of the Maze, glittering diamonds that Harry knew could cut him if he tried to climb out.

He walked, and the pulses of light resolved into images.

Harry saw himself at four, almost five, struggling to lift a heavy book. He dropped it, and the crash brought Lily running. Harry sighed as he watched his mother kneel down beside him and give him a smile he knew he would never see again.

"Harry, what have I told you about conserving your strength?" she asked.

"That I should do it." His younger self looked up at his mother, and Harry was startled. He had not thought his face would look like that. Closed in concentration, he'd expected, but there was an underlying tension to the expression that made him look as if he might burst out in rebellious defiance. Well, I hadn't been under the phoenix web for long then, Harry reasoned. I probably still had some thoughts of my own close to the surface.

"Yes, and what else?" Lily prompted.

"That I should decide what's necessary and what's not," said the younger Harry. He looked at the huge book lying on the floor. "And find the best way to do things," he added, with a sudden weight of inspiration. "Always use what's around me to my benefit."

He held out a hand, and struggled for a moment. His magic was no longer as great as it had been when he was younger, Harry decided while he watched, because so much of it had gone tame under the web. But it was great enough to lift the book in the air, wobbling, and return it to its place on the shelf.

Lily smiled at him and stroked his hair. "Good," she whispered. "That's good, Harry. When you levitate an object over an enemy's

head and then drop it, that will serve your brother. And you love your brother, don't you?"

The younger version of Harry turned his head so that it was pressing against his mother's robe and nodded.

The image dissolved. Harry blinked, unsure why the Maze had wanted him to see that. I made a mistake trying to put the book away with my hands. Is that it? I had thought I'd forgiven myself for that already.

The Maze sparked at him. Fawkes's song rose and dipped, and the answer formed in his head.

No, Harry realized suddenly, with a wave of diamond-like terror rising inside him. No, the mistake was thinking that that was a demonstration of my mother's love for me, when it was nothing more than...training. He knew the names that Snape and Draco and the rest of them would call it, and the Maze could not make him use the word.

But it could dig at his heart, and make him realize that the emotion he'd thought he'd seen his mother expressing in that scene wasn't pride in him as a child, but the kind of pride that a person showed for a well-trained dog.

She didn't love me.

Harry shook his head at once. I—that's not possible. It's true that her love did me no good, but I know that she believes she loves me. Why would the Maze say that she didn't?

Silence, and then the light and the song, or perhaps just his own understanding, which was never quiet when he wanted it to be, batted the answer back at him.

Because it's the truth. And the Maze is absolute truth, Light, honesty.

She didn't love me.

Harry felt tears gather like hot dust in the corners of his eyes. He swallowed, once, twice, and no longer wondered at his father's vague hints that he'd often collapsed, vomiting or weeping, and perilously near refusing to go on.

Harry breathed deeply, once and then again, and wrenched himself a step forward in his journey. He had to get along with this, and he could no more question the Maze on this point than he'd been able to question the justice ritual when it took his mother's magic away, or the unicorns.

I...that's true, then, I guess. She never loved me. Maybe she thought she did, or maybe she even did, but it was a different kind of love. Maybe she loved me as a sacrifice. Maybe she loved me as a pet, or a useful object. But not a child. Not a human being.

And Vera had told him that he didn't really see himself as human. That no longer seemed a wonder to Harry.

Harry shuddered once and opened his eyes, refusing to let more tears fall. He knew the truth, then, and he could accept it. There were events in his past that had prepared him to accept it. The revelation, and what it might do to him, mattered little to him next to the ideas he might get from the Maze.

"Thank you," he whispered, and then shuffled along his path. Light ran ahead of him, beside him, around his head, and Fawkes sang. Harry winced as he watched his seven-year-old self take a tumble from a large rock next to the house in Godric's Hollow. He'd watched several more scenes out of his past, with minor mistakes about himself and the world around him and times that he'd become impatient with Connor or James, but none with the devastating impact of that first image. He had known this one would probably be coming, though, as his mind came alive with memories of things Lily had actually said to him, lessons she'd stated outright.

Harry-the-younger didn't cry; by then, he'd already learned to cast mild hexes on himself and endure pain under a certain threshold, which this easily was. He just blinked and picked himself up, watching

the large gash in his knee pool with blood. He didn't know a healing spell, though, and so he did go to find Lily, once he'd checked that Connor and James were flying a kite in the yard and wouldn't see him.

Lily saw him and came over at once, kneeling and extending her wand. A whispered, "Integro," and the cut healed. Harry watched her in wonder and silent delight. When his mother cured him like this, he imagined they had a bond, just as they did when she explained the vows he made to Connor to him, or when she impressed on him, again, the need for secrecy and for him to learn as much as he could, even when he was certain that he couldn't learn any more.

"Will I be able to perform healing spells someday?" he asked.

Lily sat back and looked up at him with large green eyes. "You will, Harry," she said gently. "Healing spells would aid the war effort. It's a great advantage to know how to cure yourself on the battlefield. But they're more powerful than the magic you're learning right now. It will take some time."

Harry nodded. Then he thought about another thing. "Can I perform healing spells on my children someday?"

Lily's face changed so rapidly that Harry-the-elder winced right along with his younger self. He knew what was coming, and he suspected he knew why the Maze had wanted him to see it, and he was filled with an overwhelming, consuming sorrow, and he didn't know for certain whether it was for himself, or for the boy in the image, or for the woman who actually rose, and put her hand on his shoulder, and whispered what she did to him then.

"Harry, you'll never have children."

Harry-the-younger blinked at her. "Why not, Mum?" He rather thought he might want to have children, so that he could teach someone else all the things he was learning. Right now, he had no one to teach, because he had to keep his skills secret, and Lily already knew all his spells and tricks.

Lily gently smoothed his hair. "Because children take time," she said. "They take almost all your time when they're little, and they would be little for several years. Do you remember being little for several years?"

"Some of it," said Harry.

Lily nodded. "And you would have to devote all your time to them, and to your spouse or partner." She paused, waiting for him to reach the natural conclusion.

Harry could, of course. His vows sang in his head, and he gasped. "I wouldn't have any time for Connor!"

"Of course you wouldn't," whispered Lily. "And it wouldn't be fair to your spouse or your partner, would it? Just like it wouldn't be fair to your father if I had someone to serve like you have Connor, and I spent all my time away from him."

Harry nodded, soberly, understanding now. "Connor has to come first," he said. "To be his brother and his friend and his guardian. To never let anyone else know that I'm so close to him." It was permissible for him to only say parts of his vows sometimes, in order to make a point, since he knew them so well in their original form.

"Exactly," Lily whispered back. "So it wouldn't be fair to anyone. You couldn't spend time away from Connor, and a husband or wife would want to know why you were so close to him, and you'd have to break your vow to tell them."

Harry nodded. "Besides," he said, wondering why he hadn't thought about this before, "I'll probably die protecting Connor, so there wouldn't be time for children, because I'd be too young to have them."

Lily hugged him, briefly. "That's my brave boy," she said. "Now, go practice the spells in the second book I showed you the other day. I think you're ready for it."

Harry nodded happily at her and trotted off. The image wavered into clinging white shreds of mist, and dissolved.

Harry-the-older—no, he was just Harry, just himself, no matter how involved he had been in the consciousness of the child the Maze had shown him—shook his head and closed his eyes.

So, yes, it was a mistake to go on believing her, to think I'd never have a future. In fact, I thought I'd accepted that, since I'm letting myself spend time in Draco's company instead of driving him away.

I did accept it, didn't I?

Harry swallowed thickly when he realized that perhaps he hadn't. When he thought about the future, the first thing that came to mind was duty—maintaining his relationships with his allies, being vates, trying to defeat Voldemort or help Connor defeat Voldemort. Look at how easily he'd put Draco aside to come to Lux Aeterna. That had been as big a mistake, in its own way, as getting Skeeter to write the article about his stance towards freedom for magical creatures in the first place. He thought of the future in terms of how he could serve people, and that was the main reason he'd come into the Maze.

Harry sighed, softly, and opened his eyes. I really have just transferred my longing to serve Connor to my longing to serve other people.

I'm not sure how I can change it, though. Trying to enjoy myself with Draco and think of a future we can share together will just turn the enjoyment into another duty.

Fawkes trilled at him. Harry smiled faintly. The image of a path appeared in his mind, clear for a moment as the Maze before him was, and he suspected that both of them were pushing at him for a reason. The answer lay somewhere up ahead. The Maze would not only drag him through his mistakes, but make sure that he received the answers he needed.

As long as he could go on facing his mistake.

Harry shot a glance back at the wall where the image of himself at seven had been, and nodded. The Maze had not yet told him that his

desire to help other people was a mistake, only certain manifestations of it. So he could keep going, he could face himself, for the sake of other people.

He turned and strode on.

Most of the mistakes after that were the ones Harry expected. Mistakes in spells, in schoolwork, in the efforts he'd made to spare himself notice and give Connor glory in first year. He watched calmly as he lied to Dumbledore after the second time they faced Voldemort together, and pretended that his magic had done nothing to help in the battle. Yes, that had been a mistake. Of course, perhaps telling the truth would only have alarmed Dumbledore and caused the Light Lord to Obliviate him, but the Maze was interested in showing him what he had done wrong, not in suggesting fixes for the past.

Fixes were for the future.

Lies, and deliberate attempts to make sure people couldn't hurt him that hurt people in return, and lies of omission, and casting aside attempts to help him. Most of those, Harry thought as he watched the image of himself leaving Malfoy Manor early the summer before third year, he'd accepted just before or after Sirius's death. The destruction of the phoenix web had destroyed a good number of his compelled loyalties to his brother, and learning what Dumbledore and Lily had actually done had inspired him with anger deep enough to reject some of the conditioned ones, too.

He did wince as Sirius slipped steadily under Tom Riddle's control, as he committed suicide, but though he would always mourn Sirius and wish he had seen the signs of something wrong earlier, he knew that had not been his sole fault. He suspected the Maze would have made the memory much more painful for Connor.

To his surprise, though, the next scene that appeared after that one was not, as he'd expected, himself releasing magic outside Lux Aeterna's wards and so summoning the Death Eaters. In fact, he walked for a long time, expecting at any moment that his duels with Rosier or his hiding of his nightmares or his lashing at Umbridge and Fudge with Dark magic would appear, and nothing happened.

The cool light and air of the Owlery opened around him, and Harry saw Rita Skeeter eagerly taking down the article he dictated to blackmail James into dropping his charges against Snape. Harry nodded. It was a mistake because he should have found some better way of handling the situation. Then perhaps he would not have exacerbated the friction with his father so much.

But the image remained steady, and this time the Maze forced Harry to see the widening of Skeeter's eyes as she asked him if he had been abused, and the suspicion that remained in her face when he denied it. Harry's heart pounded loud in his ears as he realized that he hadn't really convinced her, though he'd thought at the time that he had. She still had thoughts of her own on that particular subject, even though she'd said nothing about it since.

Shit. Skeeter might not seek to cause Lily and James harm if she knew about his training in the way that Harry was almost certain Lucius and Narcissa would, but she had the power to make a taint cling to their names, if she only desired it.

If I'd known, Harry thought in misery as the Owlery faded away, I would have kept my knowledge about her being an illegal Animagus quiet in exchange for her silence on this subject, instead of her writing that article.

Too late, now. Harry bit his lip until it bled, and moved steadily forward. At least the Maze had made him aware of that vulnerability.

"Thank you," he whispered.

As expected, the Maze did not respond, and as Harry expected, it showed him Grimmauld Place, where he had almost succumbed to the singing creature behind the door—somewhat to his disappointment, it did not show him what the singing creature actually was—and his driving himself further and further into exhaustion, rendering him near useless to anyone else. He had to wince and stand with his eyes shut for a moment before the image of himself refusing Vera and Peter's "invitation" to the Sanctuary. The image simply remained still, however, until he opened his eyes and viewed it again. The Maze quite obviously thought he should have gone.

"I wonder if Seers built you in the first place?" Harry muttered as he accepted that he'd made a mistake, and even why he had made it—that he didn't want anyone seeing him and knowing him that well. "You certainly have enough in common, and Merlin knows you keep making me think of Vera."

Fawkes's song turned, and brought back to Harry a memory of James telling him the Maze had come from elsewhere, that certainly no human hand had constructed it, though human wizards might have summoned it here.

Harry nodded. "All right," he said, and slogged forward grimly through more memories, mostly slight insults done to other people, until he rounded one corner and saw the darkness he had expected ahead. It had a faint silvery sheen to it, like stars. Harry drew in his breath and crossed the final distance between himself and this memory, one he had been dreading.

Once again, he stood just outside the rose garden on Christmas night, and saw himself reach out towards Lily with magic driven by hatred. Harry watched as coolly as he could. It was quite something, to see how feral his eyes were from outside, narrow and nearly empty of sanity. He had come within a hairsbreadth of simply giving himself to the Dark music and exploding outside of all bounds. Of course it had been a mistake. Though it hurt, again, to hear his mother's words resonate in his ears, he was not surprised that the Maze had chosen to show this to him. He had lain awake in his own bed regretting it enough.

The Maze sparked, and Harry froze, lifting his chin. Once again, as with the image of himself levitating the book, when he had misunderstood what the Maze was showing him, he felt a pendulum of truth swinging and coming in hard at him.

It hit him.

Using magic borne of hatred and pain was a mistake only in the sense that I could have hurt someone else with it. I was mistaken to think that—

No. He couldn't—that wasn't true.

Fawkes's song swelled.

The Maze could not lie. It could no more lie than a justice ritual could, than Seers could, than unicorns could. Doubt that, and he would have to doubt the certainty of all that other magic.

The truth landed in his brain and pushed its way relentlessly forward.

I was mistaken to think that there was any truth in her words at all. I was mistaken to think that my magic is foul, and that other people only tolerate it because they pity me or there's something foul and twisted in themselves. She is utterly blind to me. She doesn't understand the person I became. Plant me in front of her and ask her to predict my behavior, and she will be mistaken every time.

She not only never loved me, she has no idea who I am now.

Harry shuddered softly and closed his eyes. Hadn't he faced this before, with the unicorns? Hadn't he accepted that his mother was wrong about him? Then why was it so hard for him to face this now?

The truth crawled determinedly out of his thoughts and sat there staring at him until he had to meet its eyes.

I was thinking that she might still be able to know some things about me. She did train me, and I'm still a product of that training. She was wrong about my magic being as foul as dog vomit, but she could be right about the way I'd respond when she asked me a certain question, or how I've just changed my desire to serve Connor into desire to serve other people.

I am more than that. I have made mistakes like those, but there is still more to me than those mistakes. None of what she taught me makes me able to hold back from charging to the Ministry prison when people were in danger or to love Draco...

Harry cried out, and the light around him swelled, gorgeous golden-white, and Fawkes's song soared after it like a comet arcing around the sun.

The Maze had crept up on him with these two truths, perhaps unable to find a single memory that embodied them, perhaps unable to work through the thick intricacies his thoughts twined them in. They were alive in Harry's head now, though, twisting around and braiding with each other like the Many during the hatching of the new hive, and dragging in the first one, so that there were three snakes of truth circled in his head, without beginning and without end.

His mother had been and was wrong about him—so wrong that he did not have to keep thinking he owed her a debt because of all that his training had planted in him.

He was more than a sacrifice. He always had been.

He could love Draco, and in many ways, he already did.

Harry shuddered, barely aware that he'd dropped to his knees on the Maze's floor. Fawkes's song had slowed to a warbling croon, and Regulus was whispering something that Harry couldn't make out under the waterfall-tumble of his own thoughts.

He knew that he was crying. It didn't seem to matter right now.

She can't hurt me again. Never again. That last weapon she had against me, the most potent one, the conviction that I was only worth something if I was helping people, has been taken away.

I cannot stop being a sacrifice all at once. But now I know I can, eventually. It's not the same thing as getting there, but now I know the road exists.

And all those little things like worrying when Draco was angry and preferring him to most people and not wanting him hurt and being able to dare to kiss him back when I would have run away from anyone else are all right, they're perfectly all right, and oh Merlin I

was wrong and this is all right and I can have a future I can have a life I can have love...

His breath came and went in sobs. Tears clogged his throat. He knew he was sniffing, and though his hand came up to shield his face and prevent anyone watching from seeing the tears and snot, in response to long-ingrained instinct, he knew that it didn't matter, because everyone here had already seen far more than that.

It was all right. Regulus was not going to betray him. Fawkes was not going to betray him. The Maze had known this was there from the moment he entered, and had given him the ability to see it, too.

Harry slowly stood. As much as the realization had struck him and cracked him wide open, kneeling there would only waste time, and he didn't want to spend months in here. He felt a rushing impatience now, like a warhorse tossing its head and pricking its ears on the edge of battle. He wanted to be out of here so he could continue living, continue accepting the truths the Maze had shown him, and continue—

Oh, Merlin.

Did that mean that he could have the same kinds of possibility and freedom that he envisioned for other people? That his will mattered, too, and not just if it was guarding someone else's will or opposing an injustice?

Harry didn't know how long it would last, he suspected it would start fading the instant he left the Maze—the Maze could not compel good behavior, or James's resolve would have remained iron—but for just a moment he caught a glimpse of himself as one of those people he admired and valued so much, all the illogic torn, all the ill reasoning gone, able to see himself as human in the way that Vera had said he didn't, and the revelation pierced him like a lance of sunlight.

The vision faded in the next moment, leaving old doubts and uncertainties to plague him, but he had seen it.

Like a vision from a mountain, looking east as the sun rises.

“Thank you,” he whispered, a third time.

The Maze waited, gently, and then led him on through the few minor mistakes he had yet to make, had made, had made and could correct. Harry felt the Maze exhale around him, and breathe him out. He stood on the other side of it, not such a long distance from the door after all, though there were so many bends in the silvery coils that he knew he could have walked for miles, appearances aside.

The distance he had walked was far longer than that.

Harry turned towards the door, his head light and buzzing with ideas. The Maze had shown him, after the mistake he'd made just spreading all his intentions in front of the world with that article, a path he hadn't considered. After all, if he might be human, if he might have the chance to consider himself so, that might mean that other people would be willing to aid him out of love and loyalty, and not just because they owed him debts or had made bargains with him. And there were rituals he could use working with people in cooperation that he could not if he tried to do everything all by himself, or with just Draco and Snape helping him.

Now that that simple idea had got into his head, he knew a few rituals he could look up that should prove of extreme help in freeing the southern goblins. Slytherin had cursed them, bound their web to the interchange of money. Harry knew he would hardly convince anyone to close Gringotts, but he didn't have to. What he could do, with the help of other people to have a chance of equaling Slytherin's web in raw power, was create a substitute for the web to be tied to instead of actually destroying it. It amused him to know that this couldn't be just a Light ritual, even though most cooperative spells were, because he would have to convince the goblins' web that it was still attached to Gringotts even as it fastened to the copy. That would involve subterfuge, and lying, and thus probably some glamours or illusions—Dark magic if one wanted to stretch the definition.

His magic roiled eagerly under his skin, like a school of fish. It wanted to be about creating things. Fawkes trilled as if in agreement.

Harry cast a glance over his shoulder at the Maze, and stopped. He could feel it regarding him—happy, proud, satisfied, and amused at him.

Harry took a deep breath. “Thank you,” he whispered, one more time. “I’ll try to remember. I don’t know if I can—” already the sheer clarity of the memories was rushing away from him, obscured by the mask of time and everyday reality, as visions and inspirations tended to be—“but I’ll try.”

The Maze gave a soft rumble, like a nundu, and then closed its eyes and went back to sleep. The silvery lines of light sprang up again behind Harry as he made his way confidently to the door.

He opened it, and James grabbed him by the shoulders in a fierce hug, apparently too far gone to remember that they were being careful with each other. “Harry,” he whispered. “I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again. You’ve been gone a week.”

A week, only? Better than I could have expected. Harry closed his eyes and leaned against his father, unable to prevent a silly smile from crossing his face. Fawkes flew off his shoulder and soared around them both, trilling.

A week is better than you had any right to expect, Regulus grumbled at him. You are lucky.

I am, Harry said. Merlin, I am, aren’t I, Regulus? At least, I feel lucky for right now. I could sing. I wish Draco were here so I could kiss him.

Laughter swelled in him and bubbled out, and James jerked back, looking startled.

“Sorry,” said Harry, smiling at him.

He wasn’t that sorry. Oh, yes, there was scolding to come, of course there was, but he could get through it. The Maze had burned away a great deal of the thick ugly foliage on the forest of his mind, and sunlight was falling through the branches, awakening the withered grass, coaxing up young trees in place of the vanquished old ones.

At the moment, at least, the world was heavy with possibility, vivid and young and full of the morning.

Chapter Fifty-Four: Expanding the Covenant

Snape did not like to think of how much the past two days had hurt him, when the term began again and Harry was not there for it.

He did not like to think of it partly because he was bound to start blasting things apart if he did, and partly because he was already busy setting things in motion for vengeance on James Potter, and partly because it was obvious that Draco Malfoy was suffering worse than he was.

Draco had trailed into Potions class that day with eyes so blank that Snape had thought at first he must be sleepwalking. He'd assigned Draco to partner with Blaise Zabini, only to rouse the boy into a screaming temper tantrum, of which the only distinguishable words were "regular partner" and "Harry." Blaise had confessed that Draco had been impossible to live with for the past few days. He was liable to flicker between savage sorrow and equally savage hexing. Snape had given him a Calming Draught and sent him to the hospital wing.

He tried to imagine what had happened, and wound up setting those thoughts aside, too. What mattered was dealing with what Harry had left behind—a thoroughly shattered Draco and a brother who had returned to school saying he had no idea where Harry had gone.

And James Potter, of course—James Potter who had responded to Snape's letters about Harry by turning post owls away from Lux Aeterna.

Snape wondered if he was thinking of taking vengeance because it was the easier course, but then pushed it aside, because that was of a piece with thinking about how much the last two days had hurt him.

He was checking the temperature of the potion he'd chosen as the first part of his revenge when someone knocked on the door to his office. "Come in," Snape snapped, not looking away from the potion. When it bubbled, then he would be able to dip out a vial of it and douse the fire under the cauldron, but he had to watch for the exact moment when it bubbled. This was probably only a student come for a detention, anyway, which made it less important than this was.

The potion bubbled. Snape dipped out his vial, and then flicked his wand to douse the fire and turned to deal with his erring student.

Harry bit his lip and looked up at him. "Um, hi," he said.

Snape cast a spell that should remove a glamour. Harry remained stubbornly the same. He cast one that should dispel the solid illusions that Harry had used before to trick him and Draco. Nothing happened. He murmured, "Legilimens," and found himself pushing into a startled but accepting, and very familiar, mind.

He caught a glimpse of a shining maze of silvery light, and Harry walking along its twists and turns, before Harry gently firmed his Occlumency shields and pushed him out. "I want to tell you about it," he was saying, "rather than just having you read it out of my memories."

Snape came back to himself, and stood breathing for a moment, unable to think of anything else to do. He had been tipped from vengeance, something he understood, to a moment full of violent fear and relief and joy. He wasn't used to being here. What was the right course of action?

Harry settled that by moving forward and embracing him. "I missed you," he muttered, in a voice like and unlike his own. The Harry who had left them for the Easter holidays could not have said anything like this. "I'm sorry that I caused you so much worry, but I honestly thought I needed to enter the Maze. And it did work. I know what to do next, and it helped me and healed me and—" Harry let out a sharp breath and shook his head, a movement that Snape felt against both his chest and his arms. His arms had somehow risen without his own volition and settled themselves around Harry. "It left me this way," Harry said, and moved forward and lifted his head so that Snape could see his face again.

His eyes shone. There were lines of relaxed tension around Harry's forehead that Snape had never thought to see relax in his lifetime. He gave a smile, and it was the smile of someone who had witnessed something very good and great.

Snape stared some more, and was about to speak when a burst of light came into being above Harry's shoulder. Fawkes appeared and landed there, his head twisted as he combed his feathers with his beak. Then he seemed to notice Snape for the first time, and gave a casual trill.

"Fawkes bonded with me," said Harry, as if that were the most normal thing in the world, and stroked the phoenix's shoulder affectionately.

Snape spent a moment waiting for the boulder to fall. His life did not change this way, moving towards joy. There had to be a counterweight. Perhaps his left arm would begin to burn in a moment, announcing the Dark Lord's full return to strength.

But Harry smiled at him, and Snape found his tongue.

"You stupid, idiotic, imbecilic, moronic, idiotic—"

"You said that one already," said Harry, and had the audacity to laugh at him.

"You did not tell me about entering this Maze!" Snape roared, finding his tongue at last. Vaguely, he was aware of raising his voice, which he normally never did. Mostly, he was just aware that Harry appeared to be merrily mocking his fine display of temper. "You did not tell me that you intended to endanger your life and sanity and disappear for what could have been months!"

Harry eyed him patiently. "Of course I didn't," he said. "You wouldn't have let me go to Lux Aeterna if I had."

"That is not the point!" Snape hissed, finally getting control of his voice. "Do you know what it did to those of us you left behind, those of us who had no way of knowing what happened and no reason to believe you would ever return? I am badly off enough—" the admission burned his tongue, but he knew what he had to say next would shatter any concern just for him in Harry's mind "—but Mr. Malfoy is in the hospital wing, and even your brother goes about as

pale as if he had just realized his own stupidity.”

Harry’s grin disappeared. “Draco’s in the hospital wing?”

“Of course.” Snape folded his arms. “You did not believe he was here? He would not have let me speak with you so long without interruption, but sprung on you and perhaps done something unforgivable, or Unforgivable.” He shuddered slightly. He did not wish to be there to see the two boys’ reunion. He was sure it would be even more emotional than this one, and this one was already too much so.

“I—I didn’t know.” Harry turned distractedly for the door, obviously meaning to burst through it at once and pester Madam Pomfrey for permission to see Draco.

“Harry.” Snape reached out and caught the shoulder Fawkes wasn’t sitting on. Harry turned and looked up at him.

Snape took a deep breath, and burned his own tongue again. “I was worried about you. I missed you. I am glad that you found peace and happiness in your Maze, but you could have told us that that is what you were seeking.”

“You wouldn’t have let me go.” Harry gave a fretful tug against the hand on his shoulder.

Snape ruthlessly buried any hurt that caused him, making himself remember that Harry had hugged him of his own free will. “Perhaps not, but you might have been able to persuade me. And as I do not enjoy feeling constant worry like that and having my ability to work destroyed,” he said, moving back onto territory he understood. “You will have detention every Tuesday and Thursday night for the rest of the year, starting at eight o’clock.” At least then he knew where the boy would be for a few hours a few times a week.

“Professor Snape—“

"In this matter, I am not your professor," Snape interrupted. "I am your guardian. And I do not wish you to think that I will simply nod and stand back while you risk your life."

"I've never thought that," Harry muttered, and gave another little tug towards the door.

Snape restrained him. "And what did you believe would happen when you came out of the Maze? Or what did you think would happen if you died there, and never returned, and we did not know what had occurred?"

"I—" Harry's exuberance dimmed for the first time, and he lowered his eyes. "I didn't know," he whispered. "I thought I needed to find some solution to my problems in freeing the magical creatures, and I didn't think beyond that. I'm sorry."

"You must accept some restraint," Snape said quietly. "If it is the restraint of those who care about you, that makes it more precious than the impersonal grip of hands which do not." That was something Dumbledore had told him long ago, and though the man had altered, that saying was still wise. "I have asked for promises from you, Harry, and you have broken them. I have trusted to your own emotions to restrain you, and they have not worked. Your other emotions, the ones that tell you you must be a sacrifice to be worth something—"

"The Maze taught me I didn't," Harry whispered, and lifted his head to smile at Snape through tears in his eyes. "I'm going to have trouble remembering that, but I can think about it now, since I just came out of the Maze. It showed me that I didn't have to be a sacrifice, and that my own life is just as important as other people's lives. If I can keep hold of that, I can live a very different life."

Snape closed his eyes, and this time he was the one who pulled Harry close to him and held him there, making Fawkes utter an indignant little squawk and vanish. Harry remained obediently still for a moment, even hugging back, before he wriggled. "I should go to Draco," he whispered.

Snape nodded, and let him go. "You did not see him when you came through the Floo in the hospital wing?" he asked, because it still seemed strange.

Harry blinked. "Oh. We didn't return by Floo. Dad Apparated me to Hogsmeade, and we walked from there." He held up a hand before Snape could say anything, and went on, "And I know that you think this is his fault, somehow. It's not. He didn't know I was going to go into the Maze, and neither did Connor. I never mentioned it. Please don't take vengeance on him for this."

For this. Snape grabbed hold of and treasured that phrase. In a way, it was easy for him to promise this. The notion that James Potter had no connection to Harry's face looking as if he'd bathed in sunrises was pleasing. "I promise," he said gravely. "And now, go see Draco. He is longing to see you."

Harry gave Snape a quick nod and smile, and then slipped out of his office.

Snape turned towards his cauldron, and looked at it and the vial of the potion in his hand.

He waved his wand, and Vanished both.

If he was going to keep his word to Harry, better that he did not have such a temptation nearby.

He kept his glance away from the locked desk in a corner of his office, too, because there the temptation was greater still, inspired anew each time he looked at another memory in the Pensieve Potion.

Snape shook his head and forced the thoughts away for one night. Harry was back, and he was free. That would suffice.

Draco woke slowly. He knew something had changed, that something was right which had been wrong, but the Calming Draught covered his mind with such a maze of oblivion that it took him long moments to force his eyes open and focus his empathy on the new presence in the room.

No, not new at all. Old, and familiar, and beloved.

Draco put out a hand, and felt it claimed and securely held. Another hand touched his forehead, shaking with something that might have been hesitancy or might have been remorse, but it was there. And Draco knew something of what it meant. Harry had not often touched him first.

“Harry,” he whispered, and didn’t make it a question. The Calming Draught was almost gone, he discovered, and his empathy was not swinging wildly now, trying to find its focus, as had happened earlier today. It had its focus. He sat up in bed, slowly, and turned his head, slowly, and opened his eyes, slowly.

Harry jerked his head up. He’d been sitting with it bowed. He looked at Draco now with wide eyes.

“Can you forgive me?” he whispered. “I—“

Draco narrowed his eyes and looked past the words, which didn’t matter anyway, to the emotions. Harry was feeling sorrow like cool green ivy, but just beyond that was something else, something hardly dimmed, something that—

Draco cried out and put a hand over his eyes as sunlight appeared to explode on his face. Sunrise, from a mountain. Warm sun on deep green leaves. Joy, and wonder, and relief so great that Draco thought he might have fallen into a coma if he’d been near Harry when it was new.

Harry let out a choked laugh and hugged him fiercely. “Yes,” he whispered. “I went into the Maze, Draco, and it showed me—it showed me a bunch of things that I never knew were true. That my mother didn’t love me.” His voice sank on that, as if he hadn’t much practice saying it aloud. “That I’m worth just as much as other people. That I don’t have to constantly sacrifice myself in order to justify my existence.” He faltered and fell silent.

Draco opened his eyes. Harry held and met his gaze. Terror tightened the lines of his face, but that joy still mingled with it, so that Draco thought he might know what it was like to sit on a broom a thousand feet above the ground and then push out and fall into the clear morning air.

“That I love you,” said Harry steadily, “and that I can love you.”

Draco blinked, rapidly. He hoped that Harry didn’t expect him to lean forward or lie back down. He didn’t think he could move at the moment, with emotions storming his body like soldiers at a gate.

Harry did it for him, leaning forward and gently kissing him. It was the same sort of light caress that they’d shared on the first day of spring, and Harry blushed fiercely as he pulled back again.

“I shouldn’t be doing this, you’re sick,” he whispered, and eased Draco back so that he lay flat on the bed again.

Draco caught and held his hands, and said, “Madam Pomfrey might not agree, Harry, but for my part, I think you can do it as often as you like.”

Harry just muttered something about Malfoys and their notions of mediwizardry, and then squeezed Draco’s left wrist and let it go. He left his right hand tangled with Draco’s, though. “What happened?” he asked softly. “Madam Pomfrey said you’d gone hysterical.”

Draco frowned at him. “You didn’t come back, you prat. What was I supposed to do, assume you were having a happy holiday somewhere and just forget about you? My empathy went out of control. I was feeling too many emotions and had no place to put them. The worry and the magic combined, and of course they dropped me.” He didn’t care if he was ranting by the end. Madam Pomfrey’s only other patient was a sixth-year Ravenclaw student who’d somehow managed to Transfigure her arm into a chicken wing, and Draco didn’t care if he woke her up. He was entitled to shout. Harry had left him here, damn it.

Harry frowned at him, and said the last thing that Draco had expected at that particular point in time. "Draco, you can't control your empathy when I'm not around?"

Draco looked the other way. "I didn't say that," he muttered. "I didn't—that wasn't the point of my rant, Harry."

"Answer me, Draco." The grip on his right hand firmed.

"It's a lot easier when you're around," said Draco. "You provide me with a level of familiarity and focus. I'm interested in what you feel, and you have strong emotions, so of course I can concentrate on you. And it's fine at a place like the Manor, where there are only a few people around and I can separate out each person's feelings and learn who they are quickly."

"But in Hogwarts without me," said Harry, not even bothering to let the question trail off. Draco could feel him staring at the side of his head. Having Harry's full attention had always been pleasant for him. He hadn't realized how overwhelming it could be when he didn't want to answer the question.

I don't have to lie here and listen to this, Draco thought abruptly. He's the one who did something wrong, not me. He's the one who went away and led to this collapse in the first place. He dragged himself up and narrowed his eyes at Harry. Harry already had his narrowed, so this led to a staring contest for over a minute before Draco shook his head furiously.

"You can't intimidate me like that, Harry," he said. "You left us. You lied."

Harry nodded, but his eyes didn't fall and his face didn't look less mulish. "I did," he said. "I was wrong, and I'm sorry for that. And I thought you were working on controlling your empathy, Draco, so that you didn't need one person near you all the time to act as an anchor. I certainly believed that you could distinguish other people's emotions from your own, and even bear them when you were agitated yourself. I suppose I was wrong about that."

Draco winced. "Harry..."

"The Maze changed that for me, Draco." Harry leaned nearer, and Draco squirmed. Is this the way he feels when everyone in the Great Hall is looking at him? I mean, I've felt it from him, but being stripped naked myself is no promenade. "I know something, now, about how you might love me, and feel when I'm in danger. That's why I'm more remorseful now than I would have been about this just a week ago. And I know that I love you. That means that I am concerned about you, damn it, and what happened to you. Just as concerned, just as worried, and with just as much right to get angry if you let something like this happen to you because you weren't working on controlling your empathy."

Draco swallowed, and tried to keep up the anger. It didn't work that well when he felt as if he were rolling in warmth.

"So," Harry went on, seeming to ignore the change of expression in Draco's face, "I want you to work harder on the empathy. Try to control it when I'm not around the way you would if I were there. Learn to distinguish between other people's feelings and your own. I believe it's changed you, but I don't want it to change you so much that you keep fainting in class." He raised his eyebrows. "That wouldn't really be becoming to a Malfoy, would it?"

Draco flushed at the thought of what his parents would say when they found out he'd fainted in class, and why. "Um," he said. "No."

Harry nodded. "Then I think that you should learn this, Draco. I'll help you."

"I don't want to add another duty to your—"

Harry had the audacity to laugh at him. "Do you even realize what you sound like, Draco?" he said. "Like a Gryffindor trying to convince me he can stand on his own when he's bleeding from both legs."

"I am no Gryffindor," said Draco, wincing as he remembered his unsuccessful attempts to get Connor Potter to go away and leave him alone this afternoon. Connor had acted as though someone had to be

there at Draco's bedside, so it might as well be him. That he'd been doing it out of a sense of obligation to his brother made it intolerable. Draco had finally snarled at him and driven him away, but the length of time it took had also been intolerable.

"Good," said Harry. "So that means that I'll help you learn to control your empathy, then."

Draco blinked. "When did I agree to that?"

"When you didn't speak fast enough to prevent it," said Harry. "And also when you didn't go far enough in your resolve to control it." He gave Draco a stern glance, and stood. There was still a sense of sunshine as he looked down at him, though, and Draco smiled, deeply smug that he'd managed to coax this emotion out of Harry. Harry shook his head at him, and then broke into a reluctant smile himself. "We'll make an excellent empath out of you yet," Harry muttered, as he covered Draco up with one of his blankets.

"Stay here with me," Draco whispered, catching at Harry's wrist.

Harry hesitated, and then shook his head and sat back down. "Just until you fall asleep, then."

It turned out that Draco had wanted Harry to lie down in the bed next to him, while Harry preferred to stay in the chair, and there was a short argument about that. Harry won it by default when his amusement and joy grew so warm that Draco slipped into a half-doze, which gradually turned into real sleep. He felt one hand holding his wrist and the other slipping through his hair to bare his forehead, as though he had a scar there himself. Draco sighed, and reminded himself that Harry was alive and safe and loved him, and let his fears be lulled.

"I should have known."

Harry started and turned around. Connor was standing behind him, arms folded across his chest, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"I should have known that you would come to his side the moment you got back," he said.

Harry ducked his head. "I didn't, at first. I thought he was with Snape, and it took me a little while to find out he wasn't." He hesitated, unsure of what to say to his brother. He didn't know how angry Connor was with him.

"Let's put it this way," said Connor. "Your going into the Maze made me frantic, and made Dad frantic, and made the rest of my Easter holiday tense, and lost Gryffindor a hundred points in Potions today, and had me sitting beside Draco bloody Malfoy this afternoon and trying to comfort him."

Harry blinked at Draco, who had gone to sleep with a faint smile on his lips but didn't show any sign of relinquishing Harry's hand. "He didn't mention that."

"Yes, well, it was a highly uncomfortable experience for both of us," Connor snapped. He ran a hand down his face and sighed. "Harry, when are you going to stop doing stupid shite?" he asked wearily.

"I don't have as much need to do it any more," said Harry. "The Maze showed me the past, and the present, and it—well. It taught me a lot of things." He took a deep breath. "Most especially, it taught me that I don't need to do things like go into the Maze just because it might benefit someone else."

"That's why you went into the Maze," said Connor.

Harry nodded.

"Harry, you don't have to save the whole bloody world," said Connor, and then stopped and listened to his own words. "Well," he conceded. "Maybe you do. But that doesn't mean you have to do it alone." He turned his head, and his eyes pierced Harry. "Just because not everyone agrees with you about house elves doesn't mean you've lost. Did you know that Hermione and I are both refusing to let house elves clean up after us, and it's only a matter of time before we make Ron break down and learn the charms that he needs?"

Harry swallowed. "I didn't know that, no."

"That's because you never bloody ask," said Connor. "Bloody Slytherin prat. You just assume you're alone, and you don't ask." He paused and studied Harry with a sharp gaze that made him acutely uncomfortable. "So ask from now on, and we'll be glad to tell you when we think you're making sense and when you're being an idiot."

Harry only nodded again, unable to think of what else he would say.

Connor sighed. "I knew you would come back," he said. "I tried to tell Malfoy that, but he doesn't listen to me. Something about only needing to listen to one Potter, and I wasn't him."

Harry snorted in spite of himself. Connor squinted at him. "Oh, yes, you think it's funny," he said. "That's because you weren't here when I was trying to talk to him. Gryffindors and Slytherins can get along fine, I think. It's just Gryffindors and Malfoys who don't."

Harry grinned at him. "Thank you for trying, Connor."

"Don't run off like that again, and I won't have to."

"I'll try not to."

Connor shook his head. "The best I can hope for, I suppose." He stepped up to Harry and hugged him tightly. Harry hugged him back with one arm, since Draco still wouldn't let go of his other hand. "And if you tell Malfoy that I came back here to check on him, then I'll hex you in the Great Hall tomorrow."

Harry tried to say something, but Connor squeezed him hard enough that he lost his breath, and then left the hospital wing.

Harry leaned back against Draco's bed, and smiled.
"Mr. Potter. Thank you for coming."

Harry nodded calmly at Scrimgeour as Snape followed him into the Minister's office. This was a much larger office than the Head Auror's had been, Harry thought, but it didn't really look much different. The broader walls just meant Scrimgeour had more room to hang his photographs and his maps, and to put up a large portrait of a woman with shockingly red hair and direct blue eyes. The witch tilted her head when she saw Harry looking at her, and then stuck her tongue out.

"Don't mind Grandmother Leonora," said Scrimgeour, as he stood up and extended his hand. "She was Muggleborn. She couldn't help it. No notion of proper breeding at all."

The witch in the portrait made an insulting gesture at him.

"Why do you keep such an ill-bred portrait on your wall?" Snape asked, as he took the chair next to Harry's. He hadn't offered to shake hands with the Minister, and Harry didn't think it wise to press. He did clasp Scrimgeour's wrist, and then sat down in his own chair as Scrimgeour limped back to his desk. Percy Weasley sat at a smaller one behind him, scribbling something furiously. Now and then he lifted his head and peered at them like a rabbit looking out of its hole.

"I like her," said Scrimgeour. "Reminds me that I'm human, sometimes, no matter how high and mighty I become." He turned his mild gaze on Harry. "And I think that you're here for the same reasons, aren't you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry took a deep breath. He'd asked for a face-to-face meeting, knowing it would be difficult, but unable to believe that he could say the kinds of things he needed to say in a letter. Before the Maze, he knew, he would have found this much harder.

"I am, Minister," he said. "I have to know if you're my enemy now, and if so, what the means for the cause of the magical creatures of Great Britain."

Scrimgeour lifted an eyebrow. "I wouldn't have minded if this were just another of Tybalt Starrise's wild schemes, you know," he said.

“Or if Umbridge had pushed far enough to lose her friends, and leave herself vulnerable to her enemies in the Ministry. But you are outside the Ministry, Potter, and, traditionally, it’s been a very bad thing for my poor Ministry when a wizard with Lord-level power starts manipulating people inside her.”

Harry nodded, once. “You’ve got to know that I won’t stop, sir,” he said quietly. “I want the anti-werewolf laws utterly gone. I want the webs that enslave the house elves and all the others gone. I’m perfectly willing to wait as long as I have to, but that’s for the cause of making sure other people’s free will is intact, not for making sure I comply with Ministry laws.”

Scrimgeour leaned back and steepled his fingers. His yellow eyes were calm. “Why you, Potter? Why have the magical creatures chosen you as their champion? Or why did you choose to champion them?”

“It’s both,” said Harry, with a shrug. “Partly, of course, they need a powerful wizard to fracture the webs, and neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort are going to do it without making some bargain that would leave them worse off.” He suppressed a groan of frustration when everyone in the room twitched at Voldemort’s name. Really, it’s just a word! “And partly, I want to see them free.” He took a deep breath. Courage. You can do this. “I love free will, Minister. I love the idea of giving as many people as I can as many possibilities as I can.”

“You could do that without freeing the magical creatures.” Scrimgeour tilted his head. “In fact, some people might say that you could do it better by leaving the magical creatures tied in their webs. That way, there’s no chance of, say, someone getting crushed by a giant’s club, or raped by a centaur, unless they actually go to the places where those creatures live.”

Harry winced. The centaurs are going to be problematic, too, aren’t they? “Sir, I don’t understand. What do you—“

And then he paused. They were using different definitions. He had never realized they would cause so much trouble.

“Sir,” he said, “I consider the magical creatures people as much as I do wizards and witches. I think that might be the difference between us. You see your primary responsibility as being to humans. I see it as being to everyone. Of course the Ministry should provide services for them—that’s what it says it does, anyway—but I think the services should be of the same kind as the ones it gives to humans.” Harry leaned forward, feeling his heart bound and surge while Scrimgeour stared at him. “Don’t just ‘control and regulate’ werewolves, for example. Give them the resources to bring someone who hurts them for being werewolves to trial. Don’t just talk to the goblins, but negotiate with their hanz as if she were a powerful witch or the leader of a foreign country. That’s what I want to see happen, and what the Ministry really should want to make happen, since it claims to serve the wizarding world and not just wizards. You’re not just Minister of witches and wizards, sir. You’re Minister of centaurs and house elves and merfolk and unicorns and all the rest. Expand the covenant you’ve made with yourself and your duties. It’s easy enough.”

Scrimgeour went on staring at him. Then he said, “Mr. Potter, what you are asking is—” He went still, and looked at the far wall. Percy had stopped even pretending to scribble, and watched them openly.

“Big, I know,” said Harry. “But it’s really something that should have happened already. Think about it, sir.” He could feel his impatience stretching, and forced himself to sit on it. He couldn’t hurry Scrimgeour. Bad things happened when he did. “You want the Ministry to live up to its potential, its claims. It claims that it regards magical creatures just the same as wizards and witches. Everyone knows that’s not true, but it sounds good, and there hasn’t been a Minister who was concerned about making that part of its reputation true. You could be the first.” He smiled as Scrimgeour glanced sharply at him. “And, yes, of course I’m saying that because I want them free. But if you want your Ministry to be everything it says it is, then I think you have to be willing to make those empty promises real.”

Scrimgeour closed his eyes and held still for a long moment. Then he said, “We have wandered a long way from the original discussion of your manipulating people in the Ministry, Potter.”

Harry shrugged. "This is the cause for which I'm most likely to manipulate them, Minister. Ministry laws about most of the creatures are outdated and ridiculous. As for Umbridge, she was part of the reason that I was sent to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to register myself as a Parselmouth. Putting her in charge of negotiating with them and protecting them was especially ridiculous. Of course I was going to strike back at her, to protect my allies and myself, but I didn't see any reason to stomp in with magic flaring around me. There are subtler ways."

"You are telling me that you would oppose me," said Scrimgeour.

"If you keep on going the way you have been." Harry met his eyes evenly. Snape was tense beside him, but he had not interfered. Harry was glad. "Minister, the world is going to change around me. I've finally accepted that. I want to change so much for magical creatures that the ripples are going to spread from that and affect other things and people in the wizarding world, no matter how much I might want to confine them. This is revolution. I'm going to try and make it as graceful and gentle a revolution as I can, but it's coming. I know that you have the ability to guide the Ministry through that intact. I'd be sorry to lose you as an ally. But I would rejoice if you could set the Ministry flowing with this new current."

Scrimgeour blinked several times. Then he closed his eyes, and said, "This is a grander vision than anything I came into office with."

Harry bowed his head, struck by the honesty of the admission. "I understand that, sir. I'm asking you to look beyond the Ministry and think even more about the wizarding world. But your people and your laws are all part of this. They're going to shift, and I think it should be a guided shift. And you'd be the best guide I know."

Scrimgeour sighed. "To make such a change, at my time of life," he said.

But Harry heard the undertone in his voice, and found a smile spreading across his face. Scrimgeour wasn't completely convinced, not yet. He would probably still hate Harry telling anyone in the

Ministry what to do. But the vision had caught him. He was not the sort of person who ran from a problem. He made the impossible work when he thought it needed to, like keeping Harry from simply being returned to his parents once the Fugitivus Animus spell ended. And now Harry had fascinated him with this impossibility, and he wanted to see what he could do to make it work.

“The whole wizarding world is going to change, sir,” said Harry. “And I think it’ll take many years, longer than I’ll live, even. But you can help start it.”

Scrimgeour laughed abruptly, a deep and joyous sound. “Tybalt Starrise was in here babbling about revolution,” he said. “I didn’t listen to him. I owe the boy an apology for that, though not for threatening to curse me into invisibility and silence if I didn’t stop questioning him.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Tybalt, honestly. “To slow revolution, then, sir?” he asked, holding his hand out.

Scrimgeour met his eyes and clasped his wrist firmly. “Indeed,” he said. “Merlin knows how we’re going to do it, Potter, but you’ve convinced me that we’re going to do it.”

Harry caught a glimpse of Percy Weasley’s face as he stood, and smiled to himself. Percy was caught between fiercely conflicting emotions, obviously. But then his shoulders straightened, and he gave Scrimgeour the look of someone who would follow him to the ends of the earth if necessary.

I’m glad that he has something of his own, now, and not just loyalty to Dumbledore, Harry thought, as he nodded to Scrimgeour and followed Snape out of the room. He switched the path of his thoughts then. He was wondering why his guardian had been so quiet during the conversation, when quite a bit of it must have been surprising for him.

“Sir?” he asked, and Snape looked at him. “Do you think that what I’m doing is mad?”

“No,” said Snape. “I could see where you would lead us, into revolution, as early as second year, and I made the decision to follow you then.” His voice was tranquil, though his eyes reflected a bit of amusement.

“Second year?” Harry tried to think of a time when he might have shown Snape a glimpse of the future in between being possessed by Tom Riddle and going mad, and couldn’t identify it. “How?”

“Some people see with clearer eyes than others, Harry,” said Snape, like the smug bastard he was, and then ushered him ahead of him and out of the Ministry, refusing to answer any more questions.

Chapter Fifty-Five: Down, and Down, and Down

Harry dreamed.

“I am well pleased with you, Fenrir.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Harry edged forward, light on his paws, watching every moment for some sign of a snake or Rosier. However, he could see only the man who must be Fenrir Greyback, in human form, kneeling in front of Voldemort’s divan with a look of adoration on his face. This was the same room Harry had seen once before, from which Voldemort had sent Rosier to attack Lucius Malfoy. Harry stopped when he was next to the divan. Not only might Voldemort see him if he came around it, but Harry might see him, and he had no desire to do that.

Greyback sat on his heels and looked up at his master. Harry could see that his hair was heavily streaked with gray and hung in front of his face; his body was powerfully muscled, and his teeth were yellow. Harry bared his own teeth and spat a bit. Greyback looked far more like a werewolf than Remus did, but the comparison was flattering to Remus, not the other way around. Along with the wildness came a sense of mindless brutality, as though Greyback would be as likely to savage someone important as obey a plan.

“Fenrir has accomplished his mission,” Voldemort announced in his high, cold voice to the rest of the room. “The three Light families who thought to defy me in secret have been taught how futile it is to oppose me.”

Harry felt his heart bound, once and hard. It didn’t sound as though the Ministry had managed to alert the right families when Greyback came hunting on the full moon, then.

“That is assuredly good news, my lord,” said Rabastan, moving into sight and then kneeling. “What are their names, if a servant may be so bold as to ask?”

Voldemort must have made some motion for Greyback to answer, because he did in a low snarl. “Gloryflower. Griffinsnest. Opalline. They had been persuaded to withdraw from the war, but still they would not give up less active means of defiance. Now, when they have werewolves of their own—in the family, so to speak—to deal with, they will know the weight of my lord’s hand.” Greyback grinned, and then laughed, a laugh that trailed off into a howl.

Harry carefully committed the names to memory. He did not know any of the families personally, but he recalled Tybalt Starrise saying that his father had been a Griffinsnest. Perhaps he could use Tybalt as a contact to send the victims the Wolfsbane Potion they would need.

“But what is this, Fenrir?” Voldemort was apparently trying to sound playful. He only sounded like a half-strangled child, Harry thought. “You did not deliver all the bites yourself? You left part of the work up to someone else?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Greyback, sounding unabashed. He reached out a hand towards a darkened corner of the room, and a woman Harry hadn’t smelt before under Greyback’s musk approached him. “Meet my consort, Cynthia Whitecheek.”

Whitecheek knelt in front of Voldemort, her golden eyes upturned to him. Harry felt himself twitch at the sight of her. She had a fixed stare, only slightly less mad than Rosier’s, and her movements were quick and lithe and too graceful, a predator’s. Her heavy brown hair swung to one side, and revealed that her right ear was missing, evidently chewed off.

“You have not come to my side before,” said Voldemort.

“I would have, my lord,” said Whitecheek in a murmur, “but I was but newly turned that horrible night of your fall, and then I fell prey to the deceptions of Light wizards and Ministry officials for a time. Fenrir was the one to convince me that that defiance of their senseless edicts, not submission, was the best course of survival.” She leaned against Greyback and closed her eyes. Greyback licked her cheek.

Harry grimaced. More werewolves. Great. Is he building a pack?

"Then welcome, Cynthia Whitecheek," said Voldemort. "I shall test you for loyalty later." Whitecheek merely nodded, and then crawled backward into her corner again. Voldemort turned and studied Rabastan. "And the books?" he demanded, voice turning into a hissing lisp. "You have the books for me?"

"We do, my lord," said Rabastan, inclining his head. "They were not as well-guarded as we assumed, and a single raid managed to snare them all."

Voldemort laughed. Harry winced. His scar felt like a burning brand. "Excellent," he said. "Meanwhile, Bella proceeds in her incantations, and our long wait is nearly done." Then he paused, and both the Death Eaters Harry could see seemed to shiver, as though Voldemort's expression had changed. "We have a matter of great importance to attend to now," he said, and raised his voice. "Walden, bring us the traitor."

A burly Death Eater Harry suspected was Walden Macnair dragged someone else into sight. Harry couldn't make out who it was until Macnair flung him on the floor in front of Voldemort.

Evan Rosier pushed his hair out of his eyes and raised his brows. "What is this, my lord? I was napping. I was also dreaming of a pie, a most delicious blueberry pie, and I was about to eat it."

"You are a traitor, Evan," said Voldemort, enunciating every word like a tap on a drum made of glass. "I know that you have been writing to Harry Potter and to Severus Snape. You have sent them information." His voice altered further, and Harry laid his ears against his head in protest of the pain. "You will tell me what you have told them, and immediately."

"I would rather that you pulled the information from my mind, lord," said Rosier. "That way, you may trust to its accuracy." He fluttered his eyelashes and leaned forward to lock gazes with the Dark Lord.

Harry watched as Rosier remained, motionless, like that, not giving the slightest wince, though he was sure Voldemort had accepted the invitation. At last Rosier sagged slightly, and Harry waited in the tense silence that followed for some declaration of death, or at least maiming. He was not sure that he should stay here to watch that, and not just because Rosier had demonstrated some ability to see him in the last vision.

Then Voldemort began to laugh.

Harry cowered. This was worse than the last time, and not least because the other Death Eaters joined in—except Rosier. He kept hopeful eyes fixed on Voldemort's face, stroking his left arm as if caressing the Dark Mark, but had only a small, tranquil smile.

"Are you going to kill me, my lord?" he asked. "Will it be in an exciting way? Please tell me it will be exciting. I all but perish from boredom here."

"I can see that you do, Evan," said Voldemort, wrestling his merriment back under control at last. "And you have been playing a game."

"Everything," said Rosier, his eyes flashing intently, "is a game."

"Nevertheless," Voldemort said, as if he hadn't heard him, "this is a game that benefits me. So I will allow you to continue. Do speak your mind on paper to Harry Potter and Severus Snape. They will never learn the rules of your game until too late, and if my enemy and his pet traitor shiver in anticipation of their inevitable end, so much the better."

Rosier simply inclined his head, and then stood and moved behind the divan. He promptly grinned and waved at Harry.

Harry crouched, ready to rip out of the dreamscape, but Rosier didn't alert anyone else to the fact that he could see him. He just moved his lips, mouthing several words so quietly that Harry knew no one else would see them if they weren't looking at his face.

"I am mad because I see what's really there."

He turned away after that, and ignored Harry entirely. Harry shivered and returned his attention to Voldemort, though he kept one ear cocked for the sound of Rosier whispering his name or location to someone else.

“The time of waiting is nearly done,” said Voldemort, “the time when we wake the sleeper and set our plans in motion. However, before that, there is one more great opportunity to raise our power. The night will be wild. I wish you to be on hand with some of the treasures that you brought us from the Ministry, Walden. Capture as much magic as you can.”

“My lord,” said Macnair with a bow.

The night will be wild, Harry thought. What night does he mean?

Abruptly, the answer occurred to him. Walpurgis. Walpurgis Night is coming up, and there will be wild Dark magic there.

He could not tell exactly what Voldemort planned to do, but he knew that he had heard enough information for now—especially as Rosier was now crossing his eyes at him, and someone would be sure to notice any moment.

Harry jumped and lunged, and the dream fractured around him. This time, he didn’t hesitate before he found parchment and quill and began writing a letter to Tybalt Starrise. He did have to swat at the blood that ran down his face from his scar, but that was just so that he could see.

Maybe he can help, maybe he can’t, but at least he might act as my go-between. No one will suffer unduly from being a werewolf if I can help it.

This time, because he knew what to look for, Harry saw the stirrings of Walpurgis Night before they properly began. A few days before, most of the students in Slytherin were lifting their heads higher, answering questions in class more crisply than usual, and laughing for no particular reason at meals and in hallways between classes, their faces bright with undefined excitement. Harry saw Pansy

clutching her books to her chest and smiling as they walked to Defense Against the Dark Arts, and abruptly decided that he might as well talk to her. She might know more about mysterious magic than most of the students, since her father was a necromancer.

“Just a minute,” he mumbled to Draco, and broke away to talk to Pansy before Draco could react.

Pansy looked up as Harry neared her, and her face rearranged itself in a mask of respect. Harry smiled slightly. Most of the Slytherins had reacted like that since he came back from the Maze. They could feel his new sense of self-direction, if nothing else, Harry thought, and there had been no more Dungbombs in his bed, though Howlers were still a daily occurrence.

“Pansy,” he said, “do you know what kind of artifacts someone would have to use to capture magic on Walpurgis Night?”

To his surprise, her face turned utterly pale, and she snatched his wrist in one hand and dragged him a short distance away from the flood of students. Curious eyes turned towards them, as they always did towards Harry, but Pansy gave them a glare that would have done Medusa credit and got them to look away.

“Where did you hear that?” Pansy whispered. “What do you think you’re doing, Potter?”

“I’m not going to do it,” said Harry, shaking off her grip. I understand her panic, but there’s no reason to let her hurt me. “I’ve received information that indicates Voldemort’s going to try, though.”

Pansy’s face gained a high tinge of color along the cheekbones. “It should be impossible,” she whispered. “But the Ministry’s always meddling with things they shouldn’t be, and if he got a hold of some of the devices they have...”

“We think that’s it,” said Draco over his shoulder. Harry reached back and held his hand. Draco gave him a reprimanding squeeze on his wrist. After all, Harry had told him about the dream, so, said the

squeeze, there was no reason to try and talk to Pansy in private. "Through Walden Macnair, he has some, but we don't have any idea what they are or what they do."

"This is bad," Pansy muttered. "If he does try to capture the magic on Walpurgis itself, then he'll disturb the natural order of things. That magic is always supposed to be free, and you don't control it. That's the point. That's what makes Walpurgis different from other holidays. You go dancing naked in the wildness and trust the magic to take care of you." Pansy closed her eyes and stood still for a long moment. "I'll have to talk to my father," she said at last, shoving away from the wall. "I know that it's bad, and why, but I don't know what the actual consequences would be." She looked eyes with Harry. "You're absolutely sure of this information?"

Harry couldn't blame her for distrusting him. He took a deep breath and lifted his fringe, tracing the lightning bolt scar with one finger and watching as Pansy's eyes widened. "I'm very sure," he said.

Pansy locked her mouth into a thin line. "I don't know all your secrets, Potter, and I don't want to know them," she said. "But I'll do what I can." She turned and almost ran down the corridor, calling over her shoulder, "Tell Professor Karkaroff that I'm sick and won't be able to attend class today."

Harry nodded, and ushered Draco along. Draco did give him a punch on the shoulder before they entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, though.

"I already know everything," he whispered. "You could have just taken me along to talk to Pansy in the first place."

Harry gave him a faint smile and a shrug. As the days slid past since the Maze, the answers he had received there had lost some of their power. Most of the time, he still remembered—as he had when he told Draco immediately about the dream—but old habits were reasserting themselves.

"Potter, a moment, please."

Harry turned, and forced himself to wait patiently. Over the two months since Moody had been exposed as Mulciber, he and Karkaroff had had several of these little chats. Draco would linger near the door, as much to make sure no one else would come in as to oversee Harry. Karkaroff had his hands folded in his sleeves this time, and was shivering, making Harry sure that something about this conversation was unusual even before he began.

"I plan to attend the celebration of Walpurgis Night," said Karkaroff, letting the sentence fall like a hammer. "Do you believe that I would be welcome there?"

Harry opened his mouth as he thought about it. He knew that many others would distrust a former Death Eater, especially one who had such a reputation as a coward. On the other hand, from what he knew, Walpurgis was a celebration for any Dark wizard, regardless of his affiliation. Certainly, the witches and wizards who had not been Death Eaters had not flinched last year from the ones who had been.

Harry looked into his eyes and gave a small shrug. "I think the magic would welcome you, sir," he said. "Perhaps not all the other celebrants, but who cares about them?"

Karkaroff didn't look reassured. "That was what I meant, Potter," he said, leaning nearer to whisper urgently. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Draco take a few steps closer. "I told you once that you are one of the two wizards setting Dark magic on fire all across Europe. You...know who the other is." He shivered again, and his hand hovered protectively over his left forearm. Harry inclined his head in a short nod. "I need to know if you think I would be safe there. This Night will already be wilder than the others. I can feel it." Karkaroff bowed his head and said no more.

Harry blinked. Is that the reason I'm sensing it so much more than I did last year? I thought it was just familiarity and the anxiety of thinking about what Voldemort might do, but maybe I am sensing something that wasn't there before. Of course, if Dark magic is really on fire, in Karkaroff's words, then it might be more violent than last year.

Hesitantly, Harry reached out towards the Dark music for the first time. He had a sense the song was always there, not just when webs were tearing, but most of the time, he didn't try to hear it.

Now, though, he did, the chorus echoing in his ears the moment he reached for it, and he knew at once that something had changed. The music had always been frenzied, but now it played so fast that Harry could barely distinguish individual notes. Throats screamed it, and Harry could hear the voices changing often. It sounded as though the singers were frequently collapsing in exhaustion, while others took their places.

Or they are dying, Harry thought, queasily, and fixed his eyes on Karkaroff's face.

"I can't say that it's safe," Harry whispered. "But then, I don't think that this holiday was ever safe. It's wilder this time, though."

Karkaroff gave a choked little sound, and bowed. "I shall rethink whether I want to attend, then," he whispered back. "Thank you."

Harry nodded to him, and then stepped out of the classroom. Draco's hand was firm on his shoulder, and he said, "I saw your face, Harry. You think there's some danger on Walpurgis, something even stronger than what the Dark Lord's planning, don't you?"

Harry nodded, though he checked up and down the corridor automatically to make sure that no one was near them. Draco rolled his eyes at him. "I already did that, Harry," he said. "Now. Tell me about this. What's the matter?"

"Wild music," said Harry. "Dark magic isn't just singing, this time, it's screaming. Something is going to happen on Walpurgis that I don't think Voldemort is controlling, just planning for." He squashed the yearning he could feel in his heart to give himself over entirely to the music. That was not a strong temptation for him any more, not since Christmas night and the last time it had been, but still... The vision of what it must be like to dance along to this kind of music was imperative, tugging at him.

“But you plan to attend the celebration anyway,” Draco finished in a resigned tone.

Harry nodded at him. “I do. I’m sorry. I know that you don’t like it, and that you won’t go with me—“

Draco snorted at him. “I am coming with you.”

Harry frowned. “Why?” And then he felt stupid at the look that Draco gave him.

“To protect you, of course.” Draco linked his hands together behind Harry’s head and briefly drew his face to his, so that they rested forehead to forehead, in a gesture he’d been using lately. Harry almost thought Draco was trying to take some of the pain away from his scar. “I am never letting you walk alone into danger again if I can help it. And this time, since you’ve done me the courtesy of letting me know about it in advance, I can help it.”

“You’re an empath,” Harry whispered in concern, “and this night is wild. Are you sure that you can stand it?”

Draco gave a half-bitter, half-wry smile. “I’m a better-trained empath now, thanks to you,” he said. “And yes, I’ll stand it. I trust you to protect me if something goes that badly wrong.” He gave Harry’s head a little shake. “We protect each other, Harry, remember? The shielding doesn’t just go all one way. I know that you learned that in the Maze, and I’m not about to let you forget it.”

Harry nodded, and they stood there like that for a moment more before the hallway filled with hurrying students. Harry slipped away from Draco before murmuring, “Come on, let’s see what Pansy’s found.”

Draco held his left arm lightly as they sped back to the Slytherin common room. Harry didn’t have the heart to tell him that he was holding it in the exact place where the Dark Mark would be put on, if Harry was ever to be branded like that.

On the other hand, he thought, as Draco's thumb ran over the skin, his father wears one. Perhaps he does know.
"He says it's bad, Harry."

Pansy kept her voice low. They were sitting in a corner of the Slytherin common room, not far from the fire that Pansy had used to speak to her father. She'd been done before Harry and Draco arrived, but even though the conversation hadn't been long, it had obviously shaken her. She clasped her hands together, and her gaze couldn't seem to rest on one spot for long, darting around in dizzy, butterfly-like circles.

"Voldemort could try to take some of the magic that naturally runs free on Walpurgis Night," Pansy whispered, "the magic of dead witches and wizards which comes back to us. There are—boxes—that will let him do that. My father hates them. He speaks to the dead and moves freely among them, and he hates the thought of anyone caging them. He says it's a slim chance that Voldemort could actually use that magic, but even his trying to capture it will be like breaking a dam and causing a flood. And the magic is already wild."

"Did he say why that is?" Harry asked, wondering if he could calm down the magic in any way when Walpurgis happened.

Pansy gave him a level glance. "There are two Lord-level Dark wizards in Britain right now, Harry," she said. "The magic is excited about that. It's going to dance around you and—the Dark Lord both, and be attracted to you, and try to be friends with you, as my father put it. But this is Walpurgis, and that means the magic is strong not in the sense of compulsion or deception or solitude, but in the sense of wildness, like it was with the dragons in the First Task. So an attempt to control it is going to distort that naturalness, and anger the magic. And this on a night when it's already wilder than normal because it's so excited." She took a deep breath and clasped her hands until her knuckles whitened. "My mother doesn't think you ought to go to Walpurgis, Harry."

"And your father?" Harry asked.

“He says you should go,” Pansy murmured, bowing her head. “He says that you have to be there as a counterweight, to keep the magic from hurting other people. But he also says that the distortion is so great that this isn’t going to be a normal Walpurgis. He doesn’t know what the hell is going to happen when we start trying to travel to the silver fire. The rituals that normally happen won’t, because the magic is shaking itself out of all those old ordered patterns. They’ll probably come back next year, when the Dark’s had a chance to get used to both of you, but for this one...there’s no telling.” Pansy spread her hands. “So, the choice is yours, I suppose.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Your father didn’t know what exactly I could do to counter these boxes, other than being there?”

Pansy said nothing, but when he looked at her again, he saw she was shaking her head. “He had no idea. He thinks your going is necessary, but—well, even if he knew more than that, he might be forbidden to tell me.”

Harry nodded. Necromancers were full of secrets, one of the sacrifices they made in order to be able to speak to the dead and know so much. They saw the death of every wizard and witch they met, but were forbidden to tell them about it. Dragonsbane might well have seen something which the dead would reveal to him but no one else.

“I’m going,” he said.

Pansy nodded slowly. “I thought you would,” she said. “Even Mum thought you would, and she’s planning to be there, too.”

Harry made a mental note to ask Hawthorn if she’d heard anything of Fenrir Greyback’s building a werewolf pack—always assuming he had the chance in the midst of the wildness.

“How are you going to get Professor Snape to let you go?” Draco asked, into the silence.

Harry let out a slow breath. “I don’t know.”

“Absolutely not,” said Snape, not even looking up from the potion he was stirring.

“But, sir—“

“No.”

Harry controlled his temper, and stepped forward with a deliberate pace that forced Snape to look at him. One hand kept up the stirring, though, and Harry wondered how long it had taken Snape to acquire instincts like that.

“Sir,” he said quietly, “even if I stay here, there’s no guaranteeing that I’ll be safe. The Dark magic might reach me anyway, and the backlash from the spell that Voldemort intends to perform could, too. That’s one thing Millicent thinks will happen.” Millicent had been in contact with her parents, and though they didn’t plan to attend the celebration because of Marian, they’d given her what information they could. “Once Voldemort gets the magic angry, it’ll race away from him and to the next strongest target.” He took a deep breath. “Me.”

Snape remained silent for a long time. Then he ceased to stir the potion, and leaned forward. Harry braced himself for a lecture or some sort of lament about how often he got in trouble.

“Then I shall have to come with you,” said Snape, without changing expression, and picked up a vial of delicate flower petals to scatter into the liquid.

Harry blinked. “Sir?” He found it impossible to imagine Snape at Walpurgis Night. His guardian was too strict, too stern, too controlled. The mere expression of emotions was still incredibly difficult for him. To attend a celebration where he would be expected to dance, to whirl around with partners of many different kinds, to lie on the grass and laugh...

Snape glanced up, and Harry froze. In the face of that direct dark glance, he felt his protests turn into ice, and shatter, and fall away. Snape looked fiercer than he had ever seen him, even when he was

facing Neville Longbottom's potions in their classroom. He looked as if he had been gazing into a mirror full of horrors, in fact, and Harry wondered what the hell he'd seen.

"I am going," said Snape quietly, every word loud as a knock on the door of death. "I will make sure that you are safe, Harry. By blood and bone and breath I have sworn it, and I shall keep that vow."

Harry swallowed. "Sir," he said. "I—thank you, but why?"

"Because I know more about what you have suffered now," said Snape. "It is enough, as you yourself are fond of saying."

Harry bristled, wondering if he was about to start talking of Lily again. Since the Maze, Harry had been more reluctant to discuss her than ever, because he didn't see the point. He knew the truth now, all the truths that Snape and Draco had been pushing so hard to teach him. What more did it have to do with him? He'd made his peace with his past. Let it go and die in the grass like a beheaded worm.

But Snape said only, "I would not see you suffer again," and then stirred his potion sharply three times counterclockwise. The potion gave a puff of purple smoke, turned blue, and then lay calmly in the cauldron.

Harry nodded, a bit mystified, but willing to comply. He had thought this conversation would end with his having to lie to his guardian and sneak away again. "Thank you, sir."

Snape nodded at him, and watched him out the door. Harry couldn't help looking back at him before he left.

By blood and bone and breath. Honestly.

That vow was the older one, the one that the vow by Merlin and magic had replaced. Breaking the vow to Merlin would imply intense dishonor, but not consequences in the way the old one would. If harm happened to Harry that Snape could have prevented, Snape's blood would boil, his bones would snap, and he would stop breathing.

If one believed in the vow, at least. Plenty of wizards did not.

He's just a bit paranoid. Harry shook his head. I need protection, Merlin knows, but not that much.

Snape closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall when Harry had gone. It had taken all his effort to keep brewing the potion as usual when Harry had explained what he meant to do, and requested his permission to go. Of course, the only reasonable thing to do under the circumstances was to go with Harry, but Snape knew it would be hard.

Even harder, though, was seeing the things that he did in the Pensieve Potion day after day. He faced them, and he transcribed them, just in case something ever happened to that vial of the potion.

He had not known, though, just how many memories of Harry's training would be dragged forth from Dumbledore's head, and he had not know how they would enrage and sicken him, or convince him that Harry had already suffered enough without suffering more in the future that Snape could prevent.

Enough, he commanded himself, opening his eyes. Harry does not know that you are seeing these memories of the past, and he will not understand your behavior in that light. You have to present him a calm mask.

Snape composed himself, and went back to his potion, tamping down, as usual, the horror he felt when he looked at those memories...

And the howling desire for vengeance that they inspired. Harry did not want him to take revenge right now, so he would not.

Right now.

If that ever changed, if he was ever allowed to share his horror and make sure that everyone knew the pain Harry had suffered...

Snape snarled softly to himself. Dumbledore, James, and Lily Potter would never know what had struck them.

Harry shivered slightly and stamped a foot on the floor. He stood in the Slytherin common room with the others going to Walpurgis Night. This time, he was able to see that a few Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students had joined them, and even one Gryffindor. He noticed more than he had last year, especially because he was over the newness of what had happened then, and because his eyes were running nervously in every direction, trying to guess what would happen next.

Snape stood at his right shoulder, arms folded, waiting in silence. Draco stood next to him, one hand around his. Harry squeezed back when Draco's grip tightened, seeking reassurance. Draco had received permission from his mother to go. Harry didn't know what Lucius's letter had said, but it had turned Draco white around the lips. Harry suspected that the man didn't approve of a Malfoy, and in particular his son, attending a celebration as wild and against supposed pureblood dignity as this one.

Wilder than ever, tonight, Harry thought, and squeezed back one more time. And yet, Draco agreed to come with me. He loves me. I may trust in that, in him.

Millicent was holding the dark green stone that had transported them last year. Harry noticed that her face was pale, and she kept looking at him even as she extended her hand, palm flat, before her. He raised his brows, and Millicent flushed and looked away. She obviously hated being caught out in a weakness.

Harry knew exactly how she felt.

He watched as the green stone began to glow with silver light. He felt a faint touch of coldness on his skin, as if the silver light were frostfire—

And then the magic seized them, and everything changed.

Harry felt the hair on his arms stand on end as the silver light grew dazzlingly bright, instead of falling into a cage around them like last year. They were caught in the middle of a sunburst, if any sunburst had ever been this pale and this cold. Harry saw his breath plume in

front of him, and then that vanished. He could see nothing but eye-watering silver light which he could not even blink against. The stone had frozen them all entirely.

Nevertheless, he had the sensation of being borne along at a great rate, whirled through space, tossed from point to point.

Then they sagged as the light released them, and Harry felt Draco's grip on his hand, tight enough to numb him even when the cold was gone. Snape's hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"Is that supposed to happen?" he demanded.

"No," Harry gasped, and looked up, wondering where they were. Last year, the magic had brought them to a clearing where a silver fire blazed in the dark green grass, and he had been filled with a dizzy, giddy laughter.

This time, things had changed. Harry saw that they stood in a field of silver flowers, so thick that they obscured all sight of any grass below. The flowers brushed against his arms, insistent, and left a faint, tingling chill in their wake. Harry glanced at them, and realized each blossom was shaped vaguely like a snowflake, though no more like the others than one snowflake was like another.

He turned, searching, trying to ignore the murmurs of rising panic around him, and finally saw a dark green fire blazing in the distance. It didn't look as though anyone else was there yet. Harry took a deep breath, about to suggest they should move nearer the fire and wait there as the best plan.

The magic swept him up.

Harry gasped. His own magic, so carefully tamed to his body, abruptly escaped its confines and bounced up and down around him the way it used to do. Harry reached out a hand, hardly knowing what he did, and felt a brush of alien power. The Dark magic, gone mad on Walpurgis Night, rubbed against him, and then shot away and formed itself into a dark horse galloping across the silver flowers.

Harry stared, thinking that this was another manifestation of the power of the dead that had showed itself forth last year. This time, though, the shape didn't remain a silhouette, but gained definition, and it didn't turn around and fill him with the memory of some miraculous long-dead wizard's work. It really was a dark horse, without wings but nevertheless skimming the silver flowers with only the tips of its hooves, and it had a rider. The rider wheeled around and came charging back towards Harry, tall and clad in pale silver clothing. His skin was dark green, though, and his face, though changed to something far more elegant than it had been, still familiar.

"I welcome you, Harry Potter," said the elf who had been Dobby, pulling up so that he hovered above the flowers and nodding to him. "And the others who have come with you." His gaze darted between the motionless Slytherin students who had gathered behind Harry, Snape, and then back to Harry. "It is wild tonight," said Dobby, "and once, this would have been a holiday of my people just as much as yours."

"Do you know where we are?" Harry asked, looking around again, just in case something else known to him revealed itself. It was getting harder and harder to speak in English, though, or look through ordinary human eyes. The magic was calling him, tugging him, urging and coaxing him to fly.

"Within the magic," said Dobby simply. He tilted his head and fixed Harry with one eye. "And you can feel it."

Harry swallowed. "You could say that." The magic filled his head with images of dark wings, and how he could fly with them if he wanted to.

"May we all be unbound," Dobby murmured. "Your wizards say that this night, though they think they are referring merely to the night. They are not. You were right, Harry Potter. There may be a vates for witches and wizards as well, though you will be liberating them from the webs of their misconceptions and not from slavery inflicted on them by others." His eyes sparked violently for a moment, but he seemed to regain control of himself in the next. "Do you accept that responsibility? Will you allow yourself to be bound so that others can be unbound?"

"I always have," said Harry, ignoring the way that Snape and Draco both pressed down disapprovingly. "I accepted that fate long ago."

Dobby tilted his head further to the side. "Then this night will be more temptation than gift to you," he said, and reared his horse. Harry saw that its hooves shone moon-pale, just like its eyes and mane and Dobby's clothing, and then he followed the way it pointed, like an arching blade, into the sky.

Harry looked up.

There was a maelstrom moving there, a deep pool of blackness, upside-down, so that its surface was closer to the ground and its depths extended back into the sky. Or perhaps they were the ones in the pool, and the maelstrom was only normal land, Harry thought, dizzy by the perspective. He clenched his hands together and tried to breathe normally, but it was hard.

"The Dark One is drawing on all the magic," whispered Dobby, though Harry couldn't take his eyes from the pool. "He can destroy this place, and send the dead witches and wizards into violent anger. He can make you suffer, Harry Potter. But there are two things he does not know."

Harry managed to yank his gaze away from the pool and return it to Dobby. "And what are those things?"

"That I am free," said Dobby, and stroked his hands across his horse's neck. It tossed its head, and the moon-pale mane blew behind it. "That will make a difference. As you helped me with freedom, I will help you."

Harry inclined his head, accepting the information. "And the other?"

"You do not want to bind the magic," said Dobby softly. "You must ride it, Harry Potter, and not attempt to hinder it in any way. It will be angry when the Dark One reaches out and begins to bind it. It will recoil in its anger, and you must show it that, to you, its freedom matters."

Harry was not entirely sure that he understood what Dobby was saying, but he nodded. "And everyone with me?" he asked, squeezing Draco's hand and leaning back against Snape.

"They will—they must—let it remain unbound as well," said Dobby. "It will be a great temptation, the magic passing through them, but if they attempt to grab it and understand its secrets, they will be torn apart. They are used to being the children of the wild this night. May they remember it." He eyed the other witches and wizards sternly. Harry glanced back, and saw a chorus of nods racing through the students like wind through the flowers.

"Harry!"

Harry blinked and looked around. Hastening through the blooms came Hawthorn Parkinson, clad in a gown similar to the one that she had worn last year. Behind her were Arabella Zabini and others Harry recognized from last year. He bowed to them, and then Hawthorn was at his side, kneeling down to take Pansy in her arms.

"My husband has felt the call of his magic," she whispered. "He and every other necromancer in Britain. He told me they must let the dead run through their fingers, so that they do not damage other people."

Harry nodded. He had expected something like that. His fear was falling away, and what was left was only anticipation. He looked up at the maelstrom, and felt it stretch its claws, prancing, not yet touched by anger against Voldemort.

Wild does not always mean the same thing as free, he thought. But it does this night.

"All of you," he said, and his voice was louder than it would have been normally. "Listen to me. You must let the magic pour through you, and not attempt to restrain it. For tonight, you must be purely Dark, in the sense of wildness, in the sense that dragons are. Do not fight it. Do you hear me?"

"That could destroy us," one of the adults complained.

“The other option surely will destroy you,” said Harry. “At least, this way, we have a chance of surviving.”

Dobby nodded at him, and then hit his horse with a silver whip. The horse reared, and carried him into the sky, towards the dark maelstrom. Harry saw him rising up a silvery spiral, as though his steed's hooves froze the air behind him. The spirals traced straight into the heart of the dark maelstrom, and then vanished within it. Though Harry could no longer see Dobby, he trusted him to keep his word.

He could hear Hawthorn speaking to Pansy, Arabella speaking to Blaise, and a few other adults murmuring comfort or questions to their children. Snape and Draco were still with him, but neither tried to talk. Harry wondered if they, like him, were lost in the wonder of it all, if they could feel the magic pressing around them like newly-hatched dragons, or if they were afraid, and sought merely to remain close.

There came a breathless pause.

And then Harry felt someone, far away, reach out and try to snare some of the maelstrom circling above him.

The magic screamed in rage, stirred, like the dragons, to pride and fury the moment someone contradicted their will. Harry took a deep breath, and spread his arms, inviting, accepting, welcoming what would happen next.

The magic boiled, and then lashed down and towards him, tracing the silver spiral that Dobby had made. Just before it struck him, Harry had time to see that it was not really black, as he had assumed, but dark green, like a reflection of the fire that blazed in the distance.

“Ride it!” he remembered to shout.

And then the magic hit him.

Harry felt his feet leave the ground, though he had no idea if they really did or if that was just the impression he received. Then he was

aloft, borne and ripped about by the wind. That wind reached into him, anxiously seeking, trying to find out if he wanted to cage it like Voldemort did.

Harry shook his head and let his fingers fan apart, presenting no obstruction to any power that wanted to pass that way. He tilted back his head, and looked into the heart of the storm with eyes open.

The magic sang to him, a fierce and frenzied symphony, demanding some sign that he was like the Dark Lord.

Harry did not give it what it wanted. Instead, he gave it what it needed, unbound channels to sweep through and around him, the assurance of freedom, his sweetest memories—of breaking webs and waking from his own phoenix web—the steady repetition, over and over, of what he was.

Vates, vates, vates.

The magic reared and coursed around him, and Harry caught a brief glimpse of Dobby, wielding his whip. That seemed to call the winds to him instead of keep them away, and his horse's mane was a cocoon around its head. Dobby met his eyes and nodded to him briefly, and then he was gone, racing into the dark as steadily as if there were a stone road in the sky.

Harry felt the magic lift him and cast him out over the sea. He looked down and watched the waves leaping—dark green, of course, capped with silver foam—and the magic offered him the power to control it. He could make great waves rise and inundate his enemies. Didn't he want that? Didn't he want to destroy things? So many wizards believed that Dark magic was purely evil, and used it for evil purposes. Didn't he want to?

Harry only bowed his head, in awe of the force as he would be before a storm, and replied that its will was its own.

In the distance, he felt Voldemort try to trap more of it.

The magic shuddered in repulsion, and then drove into him, ripping up memories and scattering them in front of his eyes as it tried to dig out a home for itself in the midst of his heart.

Harry watched the memories, and made no attempt to subdue the magic or tell it to back away. He only hoped the others were remembering to do the same, but he thought everyone was caught in the midst of his or her own isolated trial now, and it was all he could do to stand his own.

Draco eyeing him speculatively on the Hogwarts Express that first year, seeming to know more about him than Harry did about himself...

Harry casting a wandless charm successfully for the first time, and dropping to the grass outside Godric's Hollow exhausted, but also with a definite sense of accomplishment...

Harry swallowing a jolt of envy that he could not be like Connor and relax more often...

Lily holding him and stroking his hair, teaching him to repeat his vows for the first time when he was three...

A flash of green light and a raging scream that he had not known he remembered...

The magic paused, and then it dug at that memory, grabbed it in its teeth and hauled it around like a dog with a rat. Harry gave the image up to its hold, catching only distorted flickers as it swung in circles. The magic looked at it, and then turned and plunged into his head and came up with his memory of Voldemort's Pensieve, what had happened when he came to Godric's Hollow on that Halloween night when Harry and Connor were a year and a half old.

The magic uttered a triumphant scream, and then it boiled away from Harry, dragging him with it into a new perspective. Harry didn't think he was in his body anymore, but flying as though held in the teeth of a gigantic beast, more furious and swifter than any dragon.

The air around him roiled and churned, and then the magic dived out of it and into a place that looked halfway normal—part of the Britain Harry knew, he thought. It spread enormous dark wings, and the two wizards beneath looked up at it and let their mouths gape in witless surprise. They both held small black boxes, Harry saw, each with its lid open, each ornamented with silver filigree. The top of each box appeared to contain a miniature lightning storm, though when Harry looked closely, he could see that the clouds of those storms held the shapes of the creatures he had seen last year, the memories of dead witches and wizards. The Death Eaters had snared some of the magic of the dead, then.

Not for long, Harry surmised as the magic rolled straight down and raked over the Death Eaters' heads, bearing towards something just beyond them.

There was a small, throne-like chair, and in the chair sat something swaddled in blankets, something that made Harry shiver in disgust. It lifted its head, and cold pain ran through him, and he knew this was Voldemort.

The magic dived at him, and then Harry began to whirl round and round, as though he were a pendant on a chain. Then he was flying, and Voldemort was growing closer and closer, his pale eyes filling all the world.

Harry, or the thing that had been part of Harry, struck Voldemort, and the memory blazed in his head, reminding him of the person he hated the most in the world, the night he hated the most in the world, the night he had been defeated by a baby.

Voldemort screamed, and tried to snatch at Harry, or whatever part of him the magic had brought here, and Harry found himself abruptly back in his body, letting Voldemort's grip slide through him even as the magic had. Laughter like thunder cracked in his head. He knew it was the magic itself, as it resolved into the music of the Dark, laughing to see the Dark Lord so disconcerted.

Perhaps there was Dark magic that Voldemort had made purely his own, but Walpurgis Night was not full of it. There were different kinds

of Light, Harry thought, as he felt the power gathering itself in him, using him as a launching point. The Maze was the definition of honesty, while the webs were the definition of tameness. And there were different definitions of Dark magic, and Voldemort wielded the gift of at least one of them, compulsion, very well.

This was wildness, though, and it did not take kindly to being restrained. It snarled at Harry, and a question formed quickly in his mind.

Help us?

Harry nodded, and put his own magic behind the blow.

The Dark leaped, striking at Voldemort, rending him apart with its claws. Voldemort screamed, and his pain flowed out and through the Dark Marks on his Death Eaters' arms. The magic boiled along that pathway, too, and the dark boxes in their hands shattered. The power of the dead flooded free and back into the sky, where it belonged.

Harry rode with it.

His head filled with churning memories, the discovery of spells and the creation of half-thestrals and the miracles of necromancy, but all of them whirled away as soon as they came. He had no care to hold them, so they would not remain.

The Dark magic hovered over them, still in the shape of an enormous beast with wings and talons, and asked Harry if he would not join it. Its voice was crooning music now, soft, far more compelling than the song he had heard from Grimmauld Place's wards or on the night he had freed Dobby, because it asked him, rather than demanded that he come along.

Harry slowly shook his head. He still had a will of his own, for all that he had let the magic have its way with him, and he wanted to return to his body and the mortal world. Nor did he have a desire, like Voldemort, to wield the magic for any particular purpose, or to ride the storm and see people cowering in terror of him.

The magic nudged at him, and sang one more time, but, when it saw that he was firm, it bowed its head and flung him down a long, whirling silver tunnel. Harry saw dark green and silver flash past him, and caught a glimpse of Dobby with his whip raised in salute. He nodded back. He knew that without the elf, this night would have been far worse.

The Dark spoke one more time, in an enormous voice, before Harry dropped back into his body.

Perhaps one day, when your task is done, you will come with us.

Perhaps, Harry answered, and then fell down, and down, and down. He opened his eyes to find himself lying on thick, dark green grass, not far from a silver fire. He jerked his head up and breathed, deeply, trying to get used to both the familiar sensations of having a body once more, and the inevitable sense of loss and disappointment that the fading of the magic had given him.

I can't believe you did that.

Harry snorted when he felt Regulus whisper into his head. He'd been gone the last several days, trying to figure out any more clues that he could about where his body was hidden. Harry drove his hands into the grass and forced himself to his feet, which was easier than he would have thought, as the usual joy of Walpurgis Night was bubbling up in him. "You can't believe I do lots of things," he said. "The Maze, and now this. Why would I go into the heart of the Light and refuse to go into the heart of the Dark?"

Usually people choose one or the other, said Regulus, voice tipped with acid.

"Don't want to," Harry murmured, and rubbed his face, looking around for Draco. He found him lying on the grass, and went to him. Draco sat up at once, blinking, his eyes fixed on Harry's.

"That was—that was incredible," he whispered.

Harry smiled slightly. "You weren't overwhelmed by the emotions involved?" He leaned forward and peered into Draco's face, but saw none of the tight lines of tension around his eyes that would have indicated a headache from the empathy.

Draco shook his head. "Harry...this is going to sound strange, but I don't think anyone was overwhelmed, and no one died," he murmured. "We were all riding with you, part of the magic that burned through you. I could see and feel what you did, and so could the others. I spoke with Snape at least a few times about it, as odd as that sounds. I don't know if he'll remember all the conversations. I'm already starting to lose the memory of them," he added. "But we were there. You protected us by going in front of us."

Harry froze, and glanced around the clearing. The other witches and wizards who had been lying motionless were waking up, Snape included. He, of course, said nothing, only sat up and fixed Harry with an inscrutable gaze.

The others were looking at him.

Harry forced himself to hold his head high. It wasn't as though he could have planned this, either to gain or avoid attention. This was an experience so vast and strange that he didn't think many of those here would quickly find it a way to turn it to political advantage, either. He would not worry about what they had seen, whether many people now knew he was the one who had deflected Voldemort's Killing Curse or not, until someone actually approached him about it.

Besides, there was the joy waiting, the magic once again settled back into its predictable wild patterns.

"Come on," he said, extending a hand to Draco and pulling him from the grass. "The night isn't done yet." He felt a smile breaking across his face in spite of himself, as the magic went to work on making him happy. "Let's dance."

Intermission: After the Dancing

Draco did find himself enjoying Walpurgis, though the first memory to enter his head was of a Parselmouth raising basilisks, and it startled him badly to realize that the damn snakes were bred that way, rather than springing out of some pit of hidden foulness and evil.

No, he thought a short time later, when the wild dance had calmed a bit. Not quite the first memory.

The first memory had been of himself on the Hogwarts Express, turning and facing Harry with cool speculation in his eyes. He had not realized Harry had seen him quite that way then, had not realized how well he played the perfect Malfoy.

The Malfoy who should not have been there tonight, his father's letter snarled in his mind.

Draco bit his lip, and quite determinedly went back to thinking of the wild progress of the night. He was in bed now, lying with his hands folded behind his head and his eyes fixed on the ceiling of the four-poster. He couldn't believe Blaise and Harry were already asleep. True, they were probably exhausted, but the memories attacked Draco so furiously that he would have thought they would keep them awake, too.

He'd seen the memory of himself on the Hogwarts Express, and a few others too soft and blurred for him to make out, and then the explosion of green light that he already knew about, killing Voldemort and marking both Harry and his brother. And he'd seen some of the wizards' memories that passed through Harry when he managed to release them from the Death Eaters' confinement, too.

The frustrating thing was how quickly the wildness fell away from him, how quickly he started thinking about it instead of thinking of it, and telling himself what it had been like instead of feeling it. He almost felt as though he should have been changed more, though he had been awed by the wild music and dancing of the night, and the Hades-black doorway that appeared in front of them (which, Harry had revealed in a casual way, he'd gone through last year).

But what impressed him the most was that he'd flown in Harry's protection, felt Harry's soul rushing all around him, had actually spoken with Snape once or twice—or were there more conversations, fading away from him now?—and had still come back safely to earth. Harry had defended him without even realizing what he was doing, focused on riding out the storm and freeing the Dark magic from whatever Voldemort was trying to do to it.

Draco wondered if he would always defend Draco, and everyone else, so unconsciously.

It didn't seem fair, somehow, or right. Draco knew he was often a brat; he could admit that. But lying in bed at night, with no one else to see and comment on his behavior, it wasn't something that mattered. He could think as seriously as anyone, if he wanted to.

It probably helped that Harry's emotions were quiet, too, and that Draco was sure he had fallen asleep; he'd been reassured by a trill from Fawkes when he went to check earlier.

Harry deserved more recognition for what he'd done, damn it. He'd pretended not to notice the glances he got after his wild flight, and done his best to slide gracefully out of any conversations that might bring them, and the reason for them, up. Draco, knowing how much he disliked attention, didn't blame him for that part.

But how could he not see what he'd done? How could he be content to protect people and just not—just not receive anything in return? He didn't want the adulation, he didn't want the mindless obedience that someone like Voldemort would have used this night to inspire, so what could be given him?

Draco sighed and rolled onto his side. That was the question that occupied him, and would occupy him, more than the dancing and the consequences that had come out of it. He could give Harry his love, but that was hardly just because of his protectiveness. It was for his overall magnificence.

I wish there was some way of showing him how much good he's doing, how much he means to people.

Draco passed into a restless and troubled sleep, filled with dreams of him trying to explain to a wide-eyed and disbelieving Harry just what his accomplishments meant, until he finally gave up and kissed him silly instead.

The fifth wooden figure went down into flames and ash, and Snape hissed. His magic flared around him, called out by the wildness of the festivities and not yet settled by the paltry destruction he'd given it.

He had not meant to be—affected.

But you were, he reminded himself, and again conjured a line of wooden figures. Normally, he needed his wand for at least that much. Tonight, he did not. His wandless magic danced and lashed around him, eager to sting as a scorpion, not wearing on him at all. Snape flung out a hand, and a line of fire sprang precisely from one finger and chewed through the figure's head.

He did not think, that often, of his own raw power. His art and his obsession lay with potions, which needed cleverness, intelligence, a keen memory, a good understanding of theory, and magic that came with the occasional wave of a wand or conscious, directed effort. When he was in the midst of creating an experimental potion, his mind fixed far more on ingredients than it did on how he worked his magic into the mixture.

Walpurgis Night had changed that. Snape had expected his main focus to be on protecting Harry. But he'd had no choice but to think of other things once the music began and he found himself dancing.

His magic had responded to the savagery around it, and manifested itself.

Snape had stood, panting, on the grass when the dancing was done, and received more than one strange glance from his neighbors. Snape had glared them into submission, but he couldn't blame them. He was stronger than any wizard in the gathering but Harry. That had

come as a nasty shock to him, too. He was used to thinking of himself as the third most powerful wizard in Hogwarts alone, under Dumbledore and Harry, always remembering that beyond the walls of the school dwelt many, many war wizards and trained duelers who were more than his match. Such self-knowledge had been a matter of survival during his year of spying on Voldemort. The Dark Lord tolerated no rivals.

He spun, and thought Diffindo, wandless and nonverbal. The figure he'd indicated parted and tumbled to the floor, neatly sliced through the neck.

He thought Sectumsempra, and the wooden figure next in line all but exploded. Not as satisfying, using that one on a wooden opponent, Snape thought, his gaze gone blurry and his heartbeat a distant roar in his ears. The blood pouring out of the cuts it created was by far the aspect most likely to intimidate an opponent.

He had created that one. He'd created others, too, simple spells that nevertheless spoke of a talent most people had preferred to forget he had. It was not every wizard who invented his own spells.

When had he forgotten that?

He could not say that he had focused on Harry too much. He hadn't experimented with spells in the ten years he'd taught before Harry came to Hogwarts, either. He'd slid into a routine of making potions, teaching them, marking essays, sneering at the other professors, brooding on his past, and sniping at students who all thought they had the makings of Potions geniuses until they took his classes.

Tonight had reminded him of what he was: a powerful, capable, talented Dark wizard.

He didn't like that this had been pulled out of him, that he'd forgotten it was ever there.

Snape took a deep breath, and halted, and at last managed to force his magic to lie down again and accept his chains. It snarled at him, wanting to fly and sting, but Snape had created his shields for this

very reason. While a Death Eater, he had allowed his power far more leeway. He'd been forced to subdue it when he began teaching, and the shields had let him subdue the side of his personality that had delighted in torture and murder, too.

"Let us all be unbound," Hawthorn Parkinson, who had tortured and murdered beside Snape, had said tonight.

She has no idea what she is asking for, Snape thought bitterly.

He Vanished the rest of the wooden figures, only realizing after he'd done it that that, too, had been wandless, the magic finding release any way it could. Snape cast himself into one of his chairs and stared at the fire, his eyes narrow and crowded with new thoughts.

He had thought to find in Harry someone to protect, and, of course, if the boy changed the world, then he would live happily in that new world. Even there, though, he'd been unable to see himself in anything but the capacities he'd always had: reformed Death Eater, Potions Master, and, recently, guardian.

Now he was realizing that he, as well as the world, could change when Harry started quietly, inoffensively, turning everything upside down.

It was a discomfiting realization.

Hawthorn shook her head and let her long, pale hair flood down around her shoulders. She had been wearing it bound for Walpurgis, though it hadn't looked as though it were bound. That was part of the secret, though. She would use it as a silent, private pleasure, and also as a test. Those who noticed that she had her hair bound, those who looked but didn't notice, and those who never even looked were all different classes of people, each useful in their own ways.

Harry had been one of those who hadn't even looked.

Hawthorn paused for a long moment, standing with her head bowed and one hand clutched on the corner of the table where she'd set the hairpins down.

She was already losing her grip on most of what she'd seen in the storm. That was one of the consequences of riding it out and letting go of the magic as it passed her, she supposed. Memories, dreams of unimaginable power, whispers of glory, the songs of the dead, had run past her more fiercely than even the usual dream-like experiences of Walpurgis did.

But she had seen two things that had stayed with her, mostly because she'd gripped them in a choke hold and repeated them over and over to herself until she could at least conjure images to the words, even if they weren't exact replicas of the images she'd seen first.

Harry performing a wandless charm for the first time, and falling exhausted on the grass. What had shocked Hawthorn was not that he'd done it, but the nature of the pride he'd felt. He'd known that he did something great, something good, for the sake of other people. Even that young, it seemed, he had become determined to give himself over to others, rather than leaping up and yelling to his parents to look what he could do, which Hawthorn knew Pansy would have done if she'd achieved the same thing at Harry's age, or even now.

She had wondered who he could be feeling that pride for, and then she'd seen the memory of a red-haired, green-eyed woman—who must surely be Harry's mother, from the resemblance of their eyes—stroking Harry's hair and telling him the words of vows that horrified Hawthorn, and disturbed her profoundly. That the young boy in the memory had not understood them was no matter; he had memorized them faithfully, and his adult listeners could get at the sense of them.

"What are your vows, Harry?"

"To keep Connor safe. To always protect him. To insure that he lives as untroubled a life as he can, until he has to face Lord Voldemort again. To be his brother and his friend and his guardian. To love him. To never compete with him, never show him up, and never let anyone else know that I'm so close to him. To be ordinary, so that he can be extraordinary."

Hawthorn could not name all the emotions that those words had inspired in her, and she found that she did not want to try. Two of them were quite prominent and would do.

The first was incredulity. That Harry could be ordinary was a laughable thing, and his mother must have known it when he was as young as that, because she had been making him promise to be ordinary, instead of just assuming he would be so.

The second was sickened outrage. Why should a child guard another child?

Hawthorn did not think she could see everything yet. Even those glimpses had been small and scattered. She thought she saw the shape of something emerging, especially since it had been Harry's mother who angered him on Christmas night, but she was not sure, and chasing down blind trails in the dark was a very Gryffindor thing to do. She would wait. She would be patient. She would sniff after clues, and drag them into the light when she found them.

A movement in the mirror caught her attention. Hawthorn looked up, and realized she could see a pair of hands over her shoulders, floating in dark sleeves and speaking in the sign language she had learned to cherish.

You look troubled, my love.

Hawthorn studied her own face for a moment as she leaned back against her husband and Dragonsbane put his arms around her. Yes, she did look troubled. Or, as Hawthorn preferred to think of it, fierce. Her eyes were shining, and her teeth bared. Her wolf was close to the surface, called by the wildness of the night, and at present it was not thinking how much it hated her and wanted flesh to rend and tear. It was thinking, instead, how very good a meal traitors made.

"Hawthorn," Dragonsbane whispered. This was one of the two nights of the year when he was permitted to speak aloud. "A spirit came and spoke with me. I cannot reveal his name. But he spoke of grave

danger to this young unbinder we have bound ourselves to follow. He died in the cause of holding back that danger.”

Hawthorn nodded once.

Dragonsbane studied her from within the folds of his hood for a moment. Hawthorn soaked up the scent of rotting flesh that hung around him while she waited for him to speak. Once an offensive stink, it had become a comfort to her, and that comfort had only increased after she was a werewolf. She always knew him, even in a darkened room, were he ever so silent.

“Then we must do what we can to help him,” said Dragonsbane. “All of us, in our places and at our times.” And, because it had always been their way on Walpurgis, he guided her to their bed.

“Are you crying? Really, Pansy.”

Pansy hastily blotted at her tears, and then lay back in her bed and pulled her covers up over her chest. “I am not crying,” she said, though it was useless. Millicent had already seen, and her choked voice would have given her away anyway.

She heard Millicent snort, and then she climbed into her own bed. She had no Lumos or other charm to provide light; Millicent disdained them, preferring to undress in darkness. In her more unkind moments, Pansy thought it came from a desire to avoid looking at her own clumsy, ungainly body. Millicent was taller than any boy in their year, even Blaise, and square-jawed. Pansy pitied her intensely, when she wasn’t envying her her observation skills or fearing what she’d noticed.

Right now, Millicent had obviously noticed something that she wasn’t about to let go.

“There’s no reason to cry,” she said, sniffing now and then as though to make sure Pansy understood she was only snorting in irritation, not sniffing from tears at all. “Yes, we could have died, but we didn’t. And yes, the storm was intense at its height, but it’s over now. Really.”

“It’s not that,” said Pansy, surprised that Millicent could think she’d shed tears over either of those. Intense joy was to be appreciated for what it was; one laughed, and not wept, on Walpurgis Night. And of course Pansy wasn’t so silly as to cry over danger that was past. “It was Harry’s memories.”

There was silence from the other bed. Then Millicent said, “I thought I was the only one who saw them. I thought it was a dream. I thought that—no one mentioned them—” She fell silent.

Pansy made haste to speak. It was so rarely that she had an advantage over Millicent! “I think most people thought the same way you did, and that was why no one mentioned them. No one wanted to run the risk of sounding mad or foolish, and of course Harry was right there. But in silence, I think a lot of people are brooding. I—I don’t remember all of them, but I remember the one about Harry’s envy for his brother.”

And what was there to cry about in that? her own conscience demanded of her. You’ve seen Pensieve memories like that before, and not wept at them.

It wasn’t that, Pansy thought, as she reclined on her pillows and waited for Millicent to answer her. It was the sheer wrongness of what she’d seen. Oh, she could see how Harry’s brother was attractive in a certain light and with a strong squint, and she supposed that Gryffindor heroism appealed to some people, and she knew he had endured the trials of being a Triwizard champion thus far.

But he was nothing compared to Harry in power, in cleverness, in strength of soul—in all the ways that most mattered, all the ways that let you survive in the real world. Harry envying his brother indicated something was deeply wrong.

Millicent whispered, “I remember the one about the vows.”

Pansy shivered, jolted, as though the memory really had been hiding just under the surface of her thoughts and Millicent’s words had called it back for her. The words echoed in her ears, unpleasant, hateful, unsustainable.

“No one could keep a set of vows like that,” she whispered. “And Harry especially couldn’t. Look at him drawing attention even when he tries not to. What was happening? Why was that memory there?”

“I don’t know,” Millicent said. “And I think we should know. Both because we’re his friends, and because—” Pansy heard the sound of her rolling over, and then she whispered, “Lumos,” and Pansy knew it was serious. She rolled over herself, to see Millicent staring at her with a pale face.

“If something’s badly wrong with a person who does things like Harry does,” said Millicent, “then we are fucked.”

Arabella Zabini stood in silence for a long moment, surveying the wreckage of her home.

She’d thought, somehow, that she’d escaped the Dark Lord’s notice when she sent off the letter declining service in his ranks. She was a Dark witch, true, but only a moderately powerful one; her reputation came more from the deaths of her seven husbands and her beauty than from the strength of her magic. Voldemort might feel honored to have a Songstress in his service, but even that was a talent he could mimic with his own compulsion. He had no reason to call on her again, every reason to let her stay neutral. Arabella could court Harry Potter’s notice, but she’d toyed with the notion of lending only indirect help, not actually fighting beside him in battle. That had been an honored tradition of pureblood families on either side of the Light-Dark divide. Why should they participate in wars where they might have relatives fighting on either side, wars that only destroyed and depleted the wizarding world? The magic must be passed on. That was more important than the blood, always. Let the magic survive, and if that included some of its less powerful practitioners fading quietly into the background, so be it. It was only the fanatics who truly cared about the wars.

But Voldemort was a fanatic, it seemed.

Arabella moved at last, carefully stepping over the shattered glass of her enormous window and into her study. A glance showed her

portraits slashed, the subjects mute forever now. She looked at her desk, and found it blasted nearly in two. Then her gaze settled on her bookshelf.

Her Parseltongue books were gone.

Arabella nodded slowly. Of course Voldemort would have sent his minions to seek those, if he knew that she had them, and that information would have been only a little difficult to get a hold of. Arabella had spread the word discreetly over the years, in case a collector wanted them.

She wondered, for a moment, what the Death Eaters thought would happen as a result of this raid. Two answers came immediately to mind: that she would be intimidated into joining them, seeing how easily they'd penetrated her wards, or that she would fade even more into the background and hope that both sides passed her over.

Arabella smiled. It was a smile that was the last thing her fifth husband had ever seen.

She glided quickly and delicately across her library to a panel in the wall, and touched it with her wand. It moved aside, and she reached down and drew out a comb, and a hand mirror, and two small, leather-bound books. Of course she would never leave her true treasures out in the open, only those made for display and little else.

She was not intimidated, and she was not fearful.

She was angry. And now she had chosen her side. Circumstances had conspired to make it so that she could fight against this so-called Dark Lord and yet not turn to the hypocritical, puling, shrieking Light.

She clapped her hands to call her house elves to clean up the mess, and hummed a little tune under her breath. One of the house elves went blind and another deaf as a consequence of her song, but really, that couldn't be helped, and they would heal in time. At least they had left by the time she finished writing her letter, sent it to Lucius, and sat down to watch her face in the mirror and comb her hair.

Chapter Fifty-Six: Laying the Ground

Harry laid down his quill and blew across the ink of his notes to dry them. Then he sat back and looked carefully at the scroll.

That should work.

It should, Regulus agreed from the corner of his head, if it were possible to tell what you were talking about.

Harry snorted, but had to concede that the complicated diagram and abbreviations he'd used would be beyond anyone who hadn't already read *Light Rituals and Ways to Adapt Them*. "That's why I'm going to send a letter to Madam Marchbanks asking for a meeting, instead of trying to explain in a letter," he murmured, and then chuckled Fawkes under the chin as the phoenix appeared on his shoulder.

I'm still not sure why this should work, Regulus whined in his head. You're relying an awful lot on technicalities.

"So do a lot of rituals," Harry whispered. He had the library almost to himself, since it was early Saturday morning, but he didn't want to test Madam Prince's patience, and someone coming up and listening to him now was cause for concern, as always. "This ritual calls for twelve people, perfectly balanced in three ways. I've got twelve people, and two of the balances pertain throughout them. For the third one, I don't think it'll matter, and it's not like I have much choice—unless you could somehow change your gender."

Regulus snarled at him wordlessly, and withdrew to sulk, which he'd been doing a lot of throughout this procedure. Fawkes remained in place, though, letting out a subdued song. Harry stroked his neck, grinning.

He would have to arrange several meetings, and probably spend a lot of time explaining. But still, he thought this would work.

He was sure he knew how to free the southern goblins now. Harry received Griselda Marchbanks's response not long after the beginning of breakfast the following day. He leaned back and read it

by the rich fall of May sunlight through the Great Hall's windows, scratching the owl gently on the head and offering it a bite of toast from his plate. It was surprisingly polite for a Ministry owl, eating only what he gave it and not trying to snatch any extra treats.

Dear Mr. Potter:

I must admit, I find myself so intrigued at your proposal that I would arrange the meeting from sheer curiosity alone! I have included a Portkey in the letter, a small bottle cap. This will bring you to the meeting place with myself and the two other people you requested. Both of them have agreed to come without protest, which makes me even more curious. I trust that you shall have a good explanation when all of this is over.

Griselda Marchbanks,

Elder of the Wizengamot.

Harry chuckled under his breath, and picked up the Portkey, writing out a short response and handing it over to the owl, along with another bit of toast for a job well done. The owl launched itself into the air, and Harry slid the Portkey into his pocket and returned to eating his breakfast. He couldn't seem to stop smiling. Things were going the way he wanted them to, and though he fully suspected it would take the full month of May before the goblins were free, because of all the meetings, he was sure it would be worth it.

"What are you smirking about?" Draco demanded.

Harry raised an eyebrow at him. "That thing I tried to explain to you the other day, and which you said was too complicated for you to follow. I'm getting the cooperation of other people first, before I ask you again. Maybe they can explain it better than I can."

Draco blinked, his face oddly vulnerable for a moment. "You—you would get other people involved, just to explain this to me?"

Harry rolled his eyes and shoved his shoulder. "Of course not, you prat. These are the other people who are going to be involved in the

ritual.” He started on his sausages with a will and an appetite he hadn’t felt in a long time. Things were moving forward now. He could do this. It was true that he’d managed to break other webs with less bother and fuss, but those webs hadn’t been this complicated, either, or so tied into the functioning of a major wizarding institution.

“A cooperative ritual, Harry?” Millicent whispered from her seat on the other side of him. “Light magic? Whatever will you think of next?”

Harry laughed at her. “It’s nothing that’s going to damage my standing with your family,” he said. “It’s about the goblins, and I promise that it won’t cause a goblin rebellion, either.” He hummed as he swallowed the last of his sausages. He loved mornings like this, full of sunlight and possibilities, even though he was going to Karkaroff’s Defense Against the Dark Arts class today and there would probably be a quiz that would bore him.

“Hm. I’ll trust to your promise, then.” Millicent hesitated, as though wondering whether she should say the thing obviously poised on the tip of her tongue, and murmured, “Your vow. You keep your vows, don’t you, Harry?”

Harry lowered his fork to the table with a bang and turned to stare at her. He was not sure what was worse: the way she was looking at him, or the way that Pansy was staring at him, too, her eyes full of sorrow and awful knowledge. They didn’t know everything, he thought, but they knew enough.

How did they know?

And then he remembered the memory that had flown along with him on Walpurgis Night, and cursed to himself. Of course that was it. Neither Draco nor Snape would betray him like that, and Dumbledore and his parents would have no reason to do so. They had never wanted anyone to know that he had made the vows to protect Connor. That was the whole point of making the one to hide what he was.

“I can’t prevent you from knowing, Millicent,” he said at last, when he’d had a chance to get his breathing under control. He was not going to let this ruin his whole mood for the day. He’d done enough

brooding and worrying. He had a plan now, a good one. If Millicent and Pansy were part of the group of people who knew something about his training, then he would just deal with it, and move on. "But I can tell you the conditions for knowing. You don't talk about this with me, ever, and you mention it to no one else. You're right. I was very good at keeping my vows, until I came to Hogwarts. I'm better at promises now." He gave her a slit-eyed glance that made her blink and sit back from him, and Pansy blanch. "And I promise that you will not like what happens if you try to act on this knowledge."

"But it's—" Millicent started.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry. "It happened. That's all. It doesn't matter any more than a flood ten years ago matters now." He stood and stretched his arms above his head. Draco rose beside him, looking concerned. Harry nodded to him, showing he was all right. He was. He would not let fear of his past control him. It wasn't fear he had for his past; it was contempt. The Maze had shown him the truth of that. There was no point in paying attention to it, not next to the future. There were so many more important things that needed his attention now.

"Not a good comparison, Potter." Millicent's voice was far more subdued than it usually was when she called him by his surname. "A flood ten years ago can leave plenty of damage. Uprooted trees, for example. If you're carrying around as much damage as it seems that those vows should have caused, then—"

"Shut up."

Millicent went still. Harry wasn't sure if it was the quietly-spoken words that had done that, or the fact that the porridge left near his plate had iced over.

"This conversation is ended," said Harry, and strode out of the Great Hall, one hand clutching the bottle cap in his pocket. Regulus murmured soothingly in his head, and Draco hurried beside him. They, along with the Portkey, reminded Harry of what was important. He shook his head and blew both his anger and scorn away in a great, heaving breath.

It doesn't matter. Let it go. It's ended. And it's not as if there's anything they can do about it, even if they tried. They're bound from attacking my parents through the ritual of the formal alliance.

Think about the meeting on Saturday instead. Harry felt his face smooth out again, into a small smile. I wonder what their faces looked like when they received Madam Marchbanks's message?

Thinking of which, I need to send messages to Lucius and Hawthorn. Harry staggered a bit, and then looked around the office where the Portkey had brought him. It was a much smaller and neater place than he'd expected an Elder of the Wizengamot to have. The walls were bright with only a single portrait, one of an exquisite young pureblood woman with pale hair and odd lightning-blue eyes. She was holding a cup of some sort in her hand and staring off to the right side of the portrait. She turned and nodded a little at Harry when she saw him.

Harry turned around when someone coughed behind him, and found Madam Marchbanks sitting behind an equally small and neat desk. A chair stood in front of it, for him, and a chair off to each side, where sat the Light wizards he'd asked Madam Marchbanks to summon.

"Thank you for coming," he said simply, and sat down. "I suppose this must have taken you by surprise."

Moody, seated in the chair on the right, grunted and shifted his wooden leg so that it came down with a decisive tap on the floor. "Surprise isn't the word, Potter," he said. "I didn't expect to see you again at all. Didn't think your guardian would like you coming near me." He looked around suspiciously, as though he expected Snape to pop out of the woodwork in a moment.

Harry shrugged. "He agreed to let me come alone." He'd had a shouting match with Snape before obtaining that "agreement," but in the end it had come down to honesty. He'd asked Snape if he thought he could get through a half hour, or even ten minutes, without hexing Moody, with his temper as foul as it had been lately. Snape had admitted that he could not, and added that he would have to trust

Harry sometime, and then spent the next ten minutes describing the mayhem he would inflict on the Ministry if something happened to Harry.

Moody grunted again, but said nothing coherent, which Tybalt Starrise seemed to take as his cue to speak. He was leaning forward now, grinning in a way that reminded Harry oddly of Evan Rosier. Wild, Scrimgeour said about him.

"I'm not surprised at all," Tybalt declared. "I knew that you would summon me sometime, and I'm eager to help with whatever you want me to help with." He arched his brows. "I'm only surprised that you didn't contact me directly."

"Because I didn't know if that might be seen as interfering in the Ministry, which the Minister has already chastised me for," said Harry, and shrugged a bit. "I know that the Elders of the Wizengamot have a bit more, ah, freedom in that direction. And though Scrimgeour is in support of me, I don't know if he would back me as far as I want to go on this." He faced Madam Marchbanks and raised his brows in challenge.

The tiny old witch gave him a faint smile. "The Minister has known me most of the decades he's worked for the Ministry," she said. "He knows better than to interfere with me. So, talk, please, Mr. Potter. I have the feeling that this is far more complicated than you managed to explain in your letter." She leaned forward, folded her hands patiently, and fixed him with a stern gaze.

"Yes, madam," said Harry, and prepared to recite the simple form of the explanation.

That's not simple, it's bloody complicated, Regulus whined at him.

It's as simple as I can make it. If you don't like it, go find some other head to inhabit, Harry thought at him in irritation. Regulus was becoming more and more sulky without a body, but, on the other hand, he couldn't come up with any helpful clues either, and he refused to discuss the journal, and Harry had other things to do. If Regulus wouldn't bloody help, then he could shut up.

Regulus shut up.

“What I want to do to help the southern goblins is an adaptation of a Light ritual,” Harry began. “It requires twelve participants, just under thirteen.” He saw Moody nod, as though only by that sign could the old Auror know the ritual for Light magic. “The participants have three balances between them: Light and Dark, male and female, and their degree of connection to the person initiating the ritual. I have twelve participants who are divided equally between Light and Dark, or I will if all of you agree.” He nodded to Moody and Tybalt. Tybalt smiled at him; Moody didn’t. Harry wasn’t worried. The crusty old Auror owed him a debt, but he wasn’t as fond of Harry as Tybalt was. It was one of the reasons that Harry had asked Madam Marchbanks to contact him. “You also all have a different connection to me. The gender balance isn’t exactly equal. It will be among the eight major participants, but with the others, I just have to work with what chance has handed me.”

I’m not just chance, Regulus sulked in his head.

You’re in my head, I have to include you, and it’s very inconvenient for the ritual’s sake that you’re male, Harry responded. He thought he was learning how to handle Regulus. So stop whining.

Regulus went off to whine in silence. Harry faced the Light wizards and witch again, and waited for the questions.

“What is this ritual going to do, exactly?” Madam Marchbanks’s voice was calm and clear. “That was the part I did not quite understand, Mr. Potter.”

Harry let out a sharp breath. “The web on the southern goblins is bound to Gringotts itself,” he said. “The daily business of the bank reinforces and renews it. That means that I can’t just destroy it, not without bringing the exchange of money to a grinding halt and irritating a lot of people. But the web can be transferred, via the ritual, to another thing—a construct or copy of Gringotts. That was what the ritual was initially intended to do. It would remove deadly curses and

place them on a volunteer who had agreed to suffer the curse in place of the original victim.”

Moody uttered a sound somewhere between a grunt and a growl. Harry was glad to find that he was a little more expressive than he had seemed at first. “A ritual of sacrifice.”

“A lot of things I do are,” Harry agreed calmly. “This time, though, it doesn’t have to attach to a person. It has to attach to inanimate objects charmed to act in the same way as the transfer of coins in Gringotts, which is the basis of the goblins’ web. I’ll fool the web into thinking it’s still holding on to the real thing, and then the ritual will transfer it.” He sat back and looked at them. “Of course, it will help immensely if you would all agree to be part of the plan.”

“I will,” said Tybalt at once, a wide grin on his face. Harry wondered how he could have missed seeing this man that day in the Forbidden Forest. He took a wild, fierce delight in life. Of course, Tybalt had probably thought it best to play it sneaky when facing a Slytherin. “Not least because it will annoy my uncle like anything.” He cocked his head at Harry. “What role do you intend me to play in the ritual?”

“Contracted ally,” said Harry. “We’ve pledged faith to each other, but not gone through any particular ritual. Some of the other people participating in the ritual are ones who have.”

Tybalt nodded, as though satisfied. “And them?” he added, lounging back in his chair as he pointed at Moody and Marchbanks.

Harry looked at them carefully. “Auror Moody owes me a debt,” he said. “One I’ll consider fully paid if he helps me in this,” he added, seeing Moody’s skeptical stare. “And Madam Marchbanks will be the representative of the southern goblins. They trust her more than they do me, don’t they, madam?”

Madam Marchbanks inclined her head. “That is true, Mr. Potter,” she said. “You must understand. While they look forward to freedom and have been longing for a vates as impatiently as any of the other magical creatures, they have been betrayed again and again in their long struggle with wizardkind—far more than most of the magical

creatures have, because they have been in closer contact with us.” Her eyes shone with passion. Harry was sure, then, that she would agree to participate in the ritual. “They trust only proven friends, and then only after a long and hard proving. I have been known to them more time than you have. The webs you have shattered so far speak immensely for your record, of course, but they would still want me there.”

Harry smiled at her. “Thank you.” He turned and waited on Moody’s answer.

Moody’s magical eye was fixed on him, while his normal eye stared off to the side in contemplation. At last he said, “I want to know who the other participants in the ritual will be.”

Harry let out his breath. He won’t be pleased, but better he know now than when the ritual’s been set up and we couldn’t find someone else. “Minerva McGonagall will be the other Light witch involved,” he said. “If she agrees, and I think she will. She and I have a bond of affection, through free choice on either side, and I helped her move into her present position, with more responsibility for the wards of Hogwarts.”

“The Dark ones, Potter,” Moody said softly. “I want to know about them.”

Harry sat ramrod straight in his chair. I am not ashamed of any of them. I will defend them to Moody as I would defend Moody to them. This is part of the price for balancing between them. “Professor Snape,” he said, and watched Moody grimace. “My guardian. Narcissa Malfoy. She’s risked her life for me on more than one occasion, and she also owed me debts through her family.” Tybalt peered at him, but Harry ignored that. If Narcissa wants to tell him about her dancing, that’s her business. “Lucius Malfoy—“

“What!” Moody all but exploded to his feet.

Harry made sure to keep a bored expression on his face. “He’s my formal ally through a truce-dance.”

“Potter, he was a Death Eater,” said Moody, stressing both words separately, as though there were somehow a way that Harry wouldn’t have known that already.

“Yes, I know,” said Harry. “So was Hawthorn Parkinson, for that matter, the other Dark witch I’m going to ask to stand with us. She’s an ally of my family.”

He didn’t quite understand the look that came over Moody’s face at that. He wondered if Moody had hunted Lucius and Snape, but not Hawthorn. Perhaps his antipathy for her was not as great as it had been for the others.

“Only you, Potter,” said Moody, whatever that was supposed to mean, and sat down again. “Who are the other four?”

“The ones who screw up the gender balance,” said Harry, and Regulus whined at him. Harry ignored that, too. “Myself, of course, as initiator of the ritual. Draco Malfoy, the—my best friend.” He still didn’t think he had another word for Draco, at least not one he was comfortable telling people. “He’s from a Dark family, and I’m from a Light one, and he has to be part of the ritual, anyway. I trust him too much for him not to be. And then Fawkes, the phoenix bonded to me, for Light, and Regulus Black, for Dark. Once again, not much I can do about it. Fawkes’s bond and Regulus’s bond make it imperative that they be included somehow.” He held up his hands in a helpless gesture.

Madam Marchbanks was nodding, as though that explained everything to her satisfaction. Tybalt was grinning and bouncing one foot off the floor. Moody was frowning, and obviously looking through a list of names in his head.

“Potter,” he said slowly. “Regulus Black was also a Death Eater, and he’s dead. I understand that you consider the one no obstacle, but that other should give even you pause.”

Harry sighed. If they thought the ritual explanation had been complicated, they were not going to like this.

“Regulus didn’t die,” he said quietly. “He betrayed Voldemort, and was taken and tortured. Then his body was confined somewhere, with preservation spells on it, and his voice was bound to his brother Sirius’s mind, though most people thought he was dead and Sirius was just having bad dreams. When Sirius died last year—“ no need to go into all the details of what had happened there “—Regulus’s voice was bound to me, because I share a connection to Voldemort through my brother.” No need to tell them the nature of that connection, either. “He’s here, and he’s not leaving. He has to be part of the ritual.”

They were all staring at him, now. Harry leaned back and waited.

“I’m still in,” said Tybalt. “It will vex my uncle even more when he hears that you have a phoenix bonded to you, Harry. He considers them creatures of highest Light.”

“You’re going to tell him, aren’t you?” Harry asked, still reluctant to cause family quarrels, but resigned to the fact that Tybalt was going to do whatever the hell he wanted.

Tybalt smiled slightly at him. “Of course.”

“I am still in, as well,” said Madam Marchbanks, with a slight nod. “As long as you think that your allies are likely to agree.”

“I still have to speak with Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy, and Mrs. Parkinson,” Harry admitted, rubbing one hand over his face. That meeting was one that he was not looking forward to, for a variety of reasons. Hawthorn had also been at the Walpurgis gathering. If she had seen something of what Millicent and Pansy had seen...

He pushed the thought away. He would deal with that if and when it came up, in the same way he had when it had come up with his yearmates.

“I am fairly sure that Professor McGonagall will agree,” he said, yanking his mind back to the proper path. “As I said, we share a bond of affection. The others already have.” Snape had merely stared darkly at him for even proposing to venture into a dangerous situation

by himself. Draco had murmured sleepily into his shoulder that of course he would be part of this ritual, and then repeated his vow more fully when he'd woken up. Harry knew he had Fawkes's and Regulus's agreement.

Only because I can't prevent you from doing this damn fool thing, Regulus said.

True.

"Then I stand with you."

Harry stared hard at Moody. He'd expected a much more difficult agreement before the old Auror gave in, and had even thought he might need to ask another Light wizard—perhaps Scrimgeour, as much as he hated compromising the Minister. "Why?" he asked. "My allies' allegiances haven't suddenly changed."

Moody gave him a wintry smile. "I know that. But I also know that this is an opportunity for me to see exactly what you're made of, Potter, and what your allies are made of. You're going to take on the Light role, you said. If you do it well, that will prove something to me. If you don't do it well, that will prove something, too. That you're a sham, for example."

Harry eyed him thoughtfully as Regulus called Moody a rude name. Well, he was blunt, but it also sounded as though he were evaluating Harry as another ally. Far be it from Harry to discourage someone from doing that.

"Very well," he said. "Thank you for agreeing with me, sir." He stood up and looked at Madam Marchbanks. "I'll need to meet with the goblins soon, to discuss where we should establish the copy of Gringotts."

"The hanarz will be glad to speak with you whenever you are available," said Madam Marchbanks, with a slight inclination of her head.

Harry caught Tybalt's eye while Madam Marchbanks enchanted another Portkey for him to return to Hogwarts with, and Tybalt nodded. Harry relaxed. That meant that Delilah Gloryflower, Claudia Griffinsnest, and Fergus Opalline had indeed received the Wolfsbane Potion he'd brewed during his detentions with Snape.

With luck, we can at least make their transformations not a horror to them.

Minerva was glad to invite Harry in for a cup of tea when the boy asked, gladder to listen to something other than the two subjects that occupied her mind all day: the wards and marking. What Harry proposed was something that stirred her interest. She found herself smiling as she considered it.

A switching spell. An adapted switching spell, at that. Tricky. She looked at the boy sitting calmly and proudly in the chair in front of her, and made up her mind. All the more reason for someone experienced to help him with it, and to be available to contribute strength if something goes wrong.

"Of course, Mr. Potter," she said. "I shall be honored to stand opposite you. Or Severus, or wherever you wish to put me."

"Opposite Professor Snape, I think," said Harry, relaxing with a little sigh. Minerva was pleased to see that he didn't have as far to relax as he once would have. Young Draco Malfoy had been good for him, no matter that Minerva cordially detested the boy. "You're the strongest of the four participants in the Light side, and he's the strongest of the Dark ones. Besides, Draco has to stand opposite me." Harry grinned and sipped at his tea.

Minerva nodded, her mind trying to envision how this would work. "What is the pattern that you're using?"

Harry extended a hand casually, and several pins and other small objects on Minerva's desk fountained up and danced into position. Minerva raised her eyebrows. Harry was choosing the pattern called three-lace: four participants on either side of an aisle, facing each other; two at either end of the aisle, also facing each other; and two linked in a circle in the same space as the initiator of the ritual.

"You'll be on one side with the other Light witch and wizards," Harry explained. "The Dark ones will face you. I'll be at the initiator's end, with Draco facing me. Fawkes and, um, Regulus Black will be with me in the circle." He paused and looked nervously at Minerva.

She accepted the information with a shake of her head. Nothing is ever normal with him. Why should this be? And after what she had learned about Albus, his phoenix bonding to Harry was no great surprise. "I'll want the full tale of that someday, Mr. Potter," she said. "But for now, yes, that is acceptable."

Harry nodded to her once, and then said, "Excuse me, Professor McGonagall, but I have another meeting to attend." He paused, studying her face. "And you look as if you should get some rest."

Minerva bit her tongue to keep from taking points from Slytherin for impertinence. It was only true. "I shall, Mr. Potter. Attend your meeting."

Harry smiled at her, and slipped out the door. Minerva allowed herself to lean back in the chair and close her eyes then. Her mind returned to the wards again, and the absolute mess she'd found when she started digging into the older ones that guarded the original parts of the school.

Albus, Albus, what have you done?

The wards that should have recognized her did not. The ones that should have transferred easily fought and snarled like Minerva would if someone tried to confine her to a traveling cage in her Animagus form. The ones that were simple accumulations of defensive spells had had an extra twist and fillip added to them, one that marked them as Albus's, not anyone else's, and made them of a piece, almost, with the Headmaster's own magic.

Minerva was deeply angry, and not only because she was trying to take part of the burden of the wards on herself. If Albus had died suddenly, the school might well have refused to recognize her as Headmistress. Albus had bound himself to Hogwarts as if he

expected the school to remain his forever, and Minerva hated the idea of that.

The man I loved and followed is gone.

She was untangling the mess, but slowly, so slowly, and it gave her headaches and invaded her dreams. Minerva gave a little shudder and sat upright in her chair. She would go on because she had to, and her fury gave her strength, but the weight of her rage made her breathless sometimes, too, as did the weight of weary, grinding, endless sorrow.

"You are doing well."

Minerva did pick up her wand. The woman who had called herself Acies stood in a corner of the room again, and this time Minerva could catch a glimpse of long, pale hands. Acies continued before she could speak a spell, or indeed anything else.

"You will be needed. Needed so badly. And when the storm comes, you are one of the reasons we will give battle well."

"Will we win the battle?" Minerva asked, because she had to discount the rest as superstitious nonsense, as usual. But battles were great events, ones that distorted the weight of history and sometimes inspired more correct Divination than the flow of ordinary, everyday life. Sometimes, of course. When Divinations were not superstitious nonsense altogether.

"I did not say that," Acies whispered. "When the storm comes. That is the important thing, Minerva. Already the wind is blowing. It will come to a head in two great storms. One, you will be powerless to affect. The other is a storm of Light, and that is your element, and it will be your day. Oh, not this one, but the next."

"You make no sense, at all," said Minerva.

"You will learn to know me better when the time comes," said Acies, and flickered like a shadow caught by a lifting lamp, and vanished.

Minerva lowered her wand, and reflected whether her life was better or not for the intrusion of mysterious babbling figures. On the one hand, she could not hex Acies as she could Trelawney, and that made it unsatisfying.

On the other hand, this had inspired her with enough irritation to push her fatigue away and go to work on the wards again.

Minerva smiled grimly, and began.

Harry tilted his head back and absorbed the gentle warmth of the deep spring night into his skin. He stood near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where he'd agreed to meet Lucius, Narcissa, and Hawthorn, and the darkness around him sprang and sang with deep green rustlings that hadn't been there a month before.

It's almost a year since Sirius died.

Harry swallowed, a little, and pushed the thought away. Sirius had died beautifully, died in reckless abandon, died like a Gryffindor. He would not want Harry to let the thought of his grief distort something this important.

"Harry."

Harry turned and smiled as Narcissa emerged from the trees, holding out a hand to him. He took it, and bent to kiss it. "I trust that the trees gave you no trouble this time?" he asked.

Narcissa laughed softly, but it was Lucius who answered, stepping out and putting one hand on his wife's shoulder. "Not this time," he said, as he gave a cool nod to Harry. "It would seem the old fool has learned his lesson."

"I hope so," said Harry, turning to Hawthorn as she came out to Lucius's right side. He studied her eyes, but saw only the same concern that she always had for him, not anything new. He relaxed a bit. She didn't see anything, or Pansy didn't tell her, and she won't push. That's good.

“What did you want to speak with us about?” Lucius asked, direct and calm. “I was reading a rather interesting book, and while what you describe sounds equally interesting, the explanation was rather confused.”

Harry explained as he had with everyone else, and had the satisfaction of seeing their faces tighten in thought before they gave their answers. Narcissa and Hawthorn agreed before Lucius did. He tilted his head, fixing his eyes on the Slytherin badge on Harry’s robes, and hissed his answer in Parseltongue, presumably to keep it private.

“You understand that this goes beyond the obligations of being your formal ally?”

“Of course it does,” said Harry, blinking a bit, and then surging into amusement. Does Lucius want me to feel his independence? “I wouldn’t expect you to participate if you don’t want to, Mr. Malfoy.” He was not as worried about finding replacements for reluctant Dark participants as he was for Light ones. Adalrico Bulstrode would do as well, if Lucius refused.

Lucius considered that, then nodded and moved his eyes away so that he spoke in English. “I accept.”

Harry let out a little sigh. “Thank you,” he said, and felt a shining burst of happiness that he could count on people like this, that he didn’t have to search for a way to end the bonds that tied them the moment their obligations were made. And these were Dark wizards, two of them former Death Eaters, to boot.

With the feeling that the world was a strange and wonderful place, Harry bowed to them and then turned to walk back to Hogwarts. Draco and Snape would be missing him, for all that they’d agreed to let him go to this meeting alone; Snape’s presence, in particular, would have been an insult, an implication that Harry did not trust his allies. This dance was still delicate, for all that Harry felt he understood most of the moves better than any other circumstance of his life.

“A moment, Harry.”

Harry blinked and looked over his shoulder at Hawthorn. And this time there was extraordinary concern on her face, and he felt himself flush and fall back a few steps into a defensive posture.

“What?” His voice was close to a snap. All the while, he told himself that it might not be what he thought it was, that she could have other things to talk to him about, that—

“I feel that we must speak of your past now,” said Hawthorn, slowly, but with determination. “There have been clues that all is not right, but now I have images.” She took a deep breath and pushed forward. “Harry, I would like to know what those images meant.”

She did see the memories at Walpurgis. Harry straightened his shoulders, aware of Lucius’s and Narcissa’s devouring, inquiring gazes, his mind collecting and ordering the information they knew. There was what he had confessed to the night of Rosier’s attack on Lucius, and there were the memories of his training that Lucius had seen that first Christmas at Malfoy Manor, and there was Narcissa’s knowledge of his emotional condition after last Christmas.

“They meant things that are over and done with,” he said, keeping his own voice calm and polite, as blank as possible. “I thank you for your concern. It shows that you honor me beyond the obligations of formal family alliance. But we need not speak of them.”

“I think we must.” Hawthorn’s eyes shone, but Harry could detect nothing save concern in them, even now. Even still. Why can’t she leave me alone? Harry wondered, with a flash of desperation. “Harry, what I saw—it was not right.” A growl slipped out of her throat, and Harry realized that she was getting angry.

At his parents, who had been punished enough. At his parents, who were the pitiable things that the Maze had shown him they were. At his parents, who did not deserve to have their lives ruined like this—not to mention the consequences that it would bring down on Connor’s life, and on Harry’s own. He was not a victim, and he would not allow his allies to make him into one.

And what would it do to my reconciliation with James, to push him like this? Nothing good. If they intend to bring this up in the first place, they won't understand the subtle distinctions I want to make.

"Leave it," he said softly.

Hawthorn growled again, and Harry saw her as she had been the one time he ever met her in werewolf form, a gleaming fawn bitch, her amber eyes wild and resolute. "It is wrong. I cannot."

"I would like to know, as well," said Lucius, all cool, balanced eagerness, and Narcissa's gaze was open and gentle.

"No," said Harry. "I will not tell you this again. Nearly any other sacrifice, you may ask of me. But those that involve harm to other people, I will guard against with all my life and will. That is a promise." He let his magic rise just enough to add a tinge of danger and wonder to the night.

Lucius bowed his head slightly. Narcissa sighed at him. Hawthorn remained studying him, eyes narrowed.

"Doesn't it matter to you?" she asked. "What they did? I never thought you one to oppose justice, Harry."

"I prefer mercy," said Harry, and let his voice take on the snap of breaking ice. "And this is merciful. I thank you for your concern, but this is the end of it." He waited calmly, holding her eyes, letting her think things over. He was sure of what she would choose, even before she dropped her eyes and nodded. They had the future to think of, and the formal alliance, and the affection that she and Harry shared outside the alliance. That trumped the past.

"Thank you," said Harry, and bowed to them a second time, and made his way back to Hogwarts.

Hawthorn followed Harry's departure with troubled eyes. She had given in for right now because she had seen it was no use in going against Harry's will, but that was not going to last for long. Harry had spoken like ice, but already the cracks were racing away from him,

breaking apart whatever frozen place he'd tried to store his past in. Merlin knew how many witches and wizards had seen or guessed at the truth on Walpurgis Night. Not all of them would rest in silence. They would all move cautiously, Hawthorn thought, not sure at first what to do with the knowledge, and wary of incurring Harry's wrath, but in the end, they would move.

He is better off trying to control this information than backing away from it.

And so long as he ignores it, she thought, the memory of the vows returning to her, he is still doing what his mother desired him to swear to. He is still hiding a great deal of who and what he is, the strength which it must have taken to survive that.

"It will come out," said Lucius, softly.

Hawthorn glanced at him, and caught his eyes along with Narcissa's. They were united in their purpose of easing the truth into the light, and making sure that Harry suffered as little as possible from it.

Hawthorn saw an extra motive in Lucius's eyes, too, one that she could not enact herself. Lucius had been one of the Dark Lord's best and most inventive torturers. He did not use the pain curses with relish, like Bellatrix, but he was adept at twisting common spells into purposes never meant for them to serve, and his coolness meant he was capable of remaining at an emotional distance from his victims that Bellatrix never could. That made him all the more frightening, and all the more merciless when he did choose to torture someone.

When he found out what had actually happened with Harry, and what measure of responsibility his parents bore for it, Hawthorn thought, he would move. And then—then she pitied the Potters, the more because Lucius would not kill them.

She happened to look at Narcissa, though, and paused. Perhaps Narcissa would get to them first, and while Hawthorn did not know Lucius's wife as well, she thought Lily and James Potter might be more deserving of pity under Narcissa's hands than if her husband made the catch.

As for Hawthorn...

I cannot hurt any of Harry's family, but there is no alliance binding me from going after Dumbledore, she thought, and bared her teeth to the moonlight.

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Blood of the Basilisk

“It will do?”

Harry blinked several times, and then glanced over his shoulder, where the hanarz and ten goblins, all armed with silver arrows, waited. “It will more than do,” he said. “It might have been made for this purpose.” Then, because no one else was trying to speak to him right now, he returned his admiring gaze to the room in front of them.

It was made of stone, of course, as was the case with all the rooms in the tunnels around Gringotts, and large enough to make Harry feel like an ant moving across a sandwich. The walls that held it up curved slightly, like the ribs of an enormous beast, but contained no distracting pillars that might get in the way of the three-lace pattern Harry planned to use. There were no decorations, either, which might also interfere with the ritual once they became intricate enough. Harry would have to mark out an aisle for the Light and Dark wizards to stand on either side of and for him and Draco to stand at either end of, but that was no trouble, not compared to what he would have had to do in a less suitable place.

“When do you believe that you can free us?” the hanarz asked, jolting Harry out of his contemplation of the room once again.

“This weekend.”

Silence from behind him, and it went on until Harry had to peer and see what they thought of that timeframe. He discovered the hanarz standing upright, as if moving would cause her to collapse, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

“At last,” she whispered. The words moved only a short distance in the high-ceilinged room before dying. “At last.”

Harry smiled.

Harry considered the diagram in front of him one more time, and then nodded. He knew it by heart now, but a final study was never out of place, he thought, tracing one hand over the sketched lines.

He and the other wizards would form the three-lace pattern. The goblins would be underground with them, save for the few who would have to remain in Gringotts to make sure that the business of the bank went ahead as usual. By the time the weekend came around, Harry knew they would also have forged the metal ingots that were meant to act like coins in his replacement model of Gringotts. Goblins worked metal all the time, for their own pleasure as much as because the web compelled them to attend to wizards' money. The hanz had assured him that many of their products, from the roughest to the most beautiful, would serve in the model the web would transfer to.

That left vaults, of course, but Harry knew his magic could carve them without trouble. The replacement vaults did not have to be as large as the originals. What mattered was that they felt like them, were cloaked in illusions of belief, to fuel the deception he would practice on the web.

It is going to be complicated, then.

I told you that, Regulus brooded in his head. I told you. But you never seem to listen to me any more.

Harry shrugged at him. Maybe if you told me something worth listening to, rather than just making complaints about a ritual that has to go ahead anyway, then I would. He gently shoved the sketch under a piece of homework from his Charms class and closed his eyes. The diagram was still perfect behind his eyes.

A soft trill announced the presence of Fawkes. Harry scratched the phoenix's head as he landed on his shoulder, and glanced at him with a faint grin. "Are you going to complain about the complication of this, too?" he asked.

Fawkes leaned against him and stayed there. His only music was a low, trilling hum, by which Harry understood that the phoenix was pleased and excited about the ritual. Of course he would be, Harry thought, as he stood to get ready for bed. He was a creature of Light, and he supported Harry's vates cause, and had from the beginning. If

he could play an active part in the freeing of another kind and not just carry the message that Harry wanted to try it, then he would be happy.

Harry felt little tingles racing through his body that seemed to make even the brushing of his teeth and the washing of his face into important secrets. He wondered, when he came out of the loo, that Draco could already be asleep in his bed, blond hair thrown over his face and his breathing calm. His heart galloped like a thestral. If it hadn't been for Fawkes, he might not have found any rest when he closed his eyes.

Tomorrow, we do something grand.

Harry swallowed another piece of toast, then pushed away the rest of his breakfast, even though Fawkes gave a reprimanding croon on his shoulder. Millicent dared to stroke the phoenix's tail feathers. Fawkes warbled at her, and then cast a dark eye on Harry. See? said the eye. I think she would eat breakfast if I told her that she had to.

Harry gave an irritable shrug, nearly unseating Fawkes. He had done what he was told to. He had slept well. He'd eaten well. What he had to do today was more important than either of them, however. What did one missed meal and a few hours' missed sleep matter next to the ability to set another species free?

"You're irritated at yourself again," said Draco, without looking away from his plate. "I wish you'd stop it. It feels like sand crunching in my teeth."

Harry shook his head and tried to calm down. A glance at the head table showed that Snape was still eating at a sedate pace, and wouldn't be ready to take him and Draco anywhere by Portkey in the next ten minutes. Harry clenched his hands behind his back and breathed as normally as he could. "Sorry," he whispered. "But it just annoys me at times like these that I've got a body to be fed and rested. Wouldn't it be easier if I was just a creature of pure magic, able to help whenever I wanted, without worrying about silly things like that?"

Draco gave him a full-on glance of pure incredulity for a moment. Then he shook his head and said, "I don't know about you, Harry, but I rather like the fact that you have a body."

Harry felt his cheeks heat up, and then was further irritated at himself for feeling that way. You've heard people say things like that plenty of times without caring.

But this time, it's about me.

Draco deserved feeling like he had a mouthful of sand for that, Harry decided, and cut his toast into small, elaborate pieces until he saw Snape stand up and proceed towards the doors, for all the world as if this were a normal Saturday. Harry rose to his feet, and Fawkes spread his wings for balance, crooning all the way. Draco stood up beside him, and laid a hand on Harry's arm.

"Relax," he murmured. "It's just a ritual, and I know that you'll do fine, creature of pure magic or not."

Harry fought the urge to pull away from the touch. Draco had made him too conscious of himself again. But the last thing he wanted to do was unsettle Draco's mind so much that the ritual didn't work, so he gave him a sickly smile instead and walked towards the door of the Great Hall. Gazes burned after him. They no longer hurt as much as they had, but Harry always knew when someone else was paying attention to him.

One person in particular, he thought, as he reached the doors and briefly glanced back in Dumbledore's direction. The Headmaster drank his goblet of pumpkin juice, but his stare above that was grave and thoughtful.

He's been so quiet. I wonder if he really does want to make peace with me, or if he does think that he deserved to lose some power and prestige?

It was probably neither of those, Harry knew, and that meant he would have to guard his back against the Headmaster at some point in the future.

For now, though, Harry forced himself to shake his head and think of other things. This was a great thing, what they were going to do, and the impatience bucked and jogged and kicked in him as McGonagall followed Snape.

It makes me feel the way I did when I came out of the Maze, he thought. I know that what I'm going to do is right, and no one can intrude and question that, and my own conscience can't sting me, either.

The six of them—well, six counting Regulus's voice in Harry's head and the phoenix on Harry's shoulder, who had to be counted because they would be part of the ritual, like it or not—arrived in the enormous room at the same time as Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. Snape exchanged a guarded nod with Lucius, and Harry was simultaneously puzzled and amused to see a similar gesture pass between Narcissa and McGonagall. It was just as well that neither pair would be standing across from each other, he thought, where the balances were the most delicate.

"Harry," said Narcissa, glancing away from McGonagall in the next instant and seemingly trying to pretend that she'd never looked. "How are you? You look much better than you have done in the past."

Harry winced. Did she have to draw attention to that? "I've been trying to keep my strength up, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, as politely as he could at this time, with the restlessness and his magic both bouncing up and down in him. "I know this is important, and I wouldn't like to let the reins slip from my control because of lack of food and sleep."

Lucius whispered something in his wife's ear. Narcissa listened with a slight frown and a nod, but didn't bother to let Harry in on what had been said. Harry felt a spike of irritation.

Draco placed a hand on the back of his neck and squeezed gently. "Calm down," he whispered. "We're going to do this, and then I'm going to make Mother take us to Florean Fortescue's. We're near Diagon Alley anyway, and that slop the house elves fix at Hogwarts can't compare to real ice cream."

Harry chuckled in spite of himself, and in spite of the reminder of house elves, and then looked up sharply. A door had opened on the far side of the chamber, and Griselda Marchbanks had entered with the hanarz of the southern goblins beside her.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, though she nodded at the others. “The ingots that you required are assembled.” She nodded over Harry’s shoulder, and he turned to look, catching his breath at the sight of the piled metal. Some of the pieces of it really were coins, though not in any denomination handled in the wizarding world, but much was simple worked metal, wrought to artistic patterns that goblins understood and humans did not.

“Thank you,” he said, and then looked up as another three Portkeys tugged in another three people. Hawthorn arrived first, at once standing and moving smoothly away from the wall where her coin had brought her, her eyes fastening on Harry’s as though she wondered whether he had managed to hurt himself since they had last met. Moody came in behind her, growling softly at the sight of Lucius and Hawthorn, who both proceeded to ignore him. Tybalt was bouncing his wand in his hand and grinning at everyone. He had a bell tied to his hair just above his ear, but Harry couldn’t tell if that meant something or was just to mock and imitate his uncle.

“Thank you for coming,” said Harry, inclining his head. The restlessness had soothed itself a bit when he came closer to his goal. It was replaced, now, with determination, which Harry thought could match the roar of blood in his ears for relentless movement. “There’s no reason to delay, I think, so we should move.” He looked at the hanarz, just to make sure the goblins did not need more time, and was met with a faint smile and a click of her nails.

“We have waited centuries,” she said. “You made a golden promise. We are ready.”

Harry nodded to her, and then raised a hand. Nearly everyone jumped as his magic boiled out of his body, following the movement of his palm, as he cut a rectangle into the floor. The goblins only watched, though, as if they had expected something like this. Harry

concentrated on making sure that the rectangle's sides were exactly equal. It was important to the ritual, and it was good practice for the cutting of the vaults he would have to undergo in a few moments.

"Does anyone have any questions?" he asked, as the final chip of stone soared out of the floor and his magic stopped cutting.

No one did, though Harry thought that Moody and Tybalt, at least, looked as if they were wondering what the hell else he could do, if he wanted to. Harry gestured, and the others moved into their places as he had discussed with them in further meetings after that first one: Draco on the far end of the rectangle, across from Harry; Snape next to him and across from McGonagall, as they were balanced by being the strongest each in power of their respective sides; Hawthorn next to Snape and across from Tybalt, balanced as they each were by the wildness of their personalities; Lucius next to Hawthorn and across from Griselda Marchbanks, as the odd ones out otherwise; and Narcissa next to her husband and across from Moody, made necessary by Moody's intense dislike of all the other three declared to the Dark. Harry took his place at the far end of the rectangle, Fawkes on his shoulder and Regulus at the ready in his mind.

He felt the sharp hum as the three-lace pattern closed and called the ritual's attention. Magic was already pouring into him, or perhaps rising from within him; Harry had read so much about rituals in the last little while, the theoretical arguments as to whether they filled with power from the outside or simply gave a mental mold to the wizard's own strength, that he was not sure which he believed. The three-lace pattern, at least, was old enough that the ritual had required little work to adapt.

No, the complicated part would come with the conjoining of the other wizards' powers—which Harry had to guide, as the initiator of the ritual and the only one here that everyone else was bound to—and the creation of the replacement for Gringotts. Oh, and the actual transfer of the web, and convincing it that it still bound the goblins.

Harry extended his hands, aware of Fawkes's warmth behind his eyelids, Regulus waiting and not whining now, and the watching goblins, who had almost all crowded in at the door of the enormous

room. The web blazed into being above them, the fierce white thing Harry had seen once before. He knew about it this time, so he could avoid being blinded by it.

He took a deep breath, and calmed himself, and then uncoiled his magic from out of the center of his body, rising like a whip, like a dragon.

Now.

Magic surged out of him and into Draco, on the other end of the rectangle. For a moment, it wavered. They were balanced by their bond and by their respective families' allegiances to Light and Dark, but the ritual was seeking, ideally, for a Dark witch, and not finding her.

Draco gasped a bit, but met Harry's eyes and held them with a faint smile. His trust was absolute, a bond too strong to be ignored. Harry saw it create the first basis of the pattern between them, a wavering link, tinged deep green on Draco's end and gold on his, fading to gray in the middle. The light flickered and danced before settling into those colors, though. Harry supposed it came from his use of so much Dark magic in the past.

He concentrated calmly on the fact of how much he wanted this ritual to work, and the tie firmed. He could do this, Harry thought. The unicorns had shown him his deep green soul tinged with gold—the color of sunlight, the color of Light. He was both. He could play host to one as easily as the other.

The bond firmed, and sang, a deep musical vibration that jolted the chamber and made the wizards and witches in the pattern flinch, again. Fawkes crooned. Harry smiled.

A faint chiming sound joined the music for a moment, making Harry turn his head curiously, but then it faded. He shrugged. Maybe that's just a side effect of the ritual that I didn't read about.

It had not destabilized the bond, at least, and Harry reached out to Fawkes and Regulus in turn, speaking with words this time. His and

Draco's trust was too deep a thing to need them. Phoenix, loyal creature of Light, unselfish giver to my vates work. Regulus Black, once Death Eater, brother of my godfather—sorrow shook in his mental voice, but Harry forced it steady—voice in my head, son of the Dark.

They heard him, and they answered, Fawkes's answer audible and Regulus's a whisper at the corners of his brain. Harry felt the bond shoot from him, and this time there was an audible gasp—from McGonagall, he thought. Harry blinked and looked to the side.

This bond was orange and black, also fading to gray in the middle, and joined at one end to Fawkes's throat. The other end emerged from his temple. Harry swallowed, a bit. He could see how it would be startling.

That bond began singing, too, a clear, pure melody that turned sharply in the middle to a sobbing note. Another chime followed it, slightly louder this time, but no one else voiced concern, and Harry decided that must be normal for this ritual.

Wavering slightly from the sheer power of the magic currently channeled through him, he turned and looked at Moody and Narcissa, the nearest pair to him. Narcissa gave him the barest smile, a curve of her lips. Moody grunted at him—no surprise. His magical eye was fixed intently on Harry, as though he was trying to discover the way the bond going into his head worked.

"Alastor Moody," Harry said aloud. "Light wizard, old Auror, hunter of Death Eaters, in debt to me. Narcissa Malfoy, daughter of the Black house, mother of Draco Malfoy, never a Death Eater, Dark witch, loyal dancer."

The bond coalesced without music, but with an angry hum, which Harry thought came from the difference of two contrary souls beating against each other. On Narcissa's end, it was a dreamy gray, shot through with sparks of black. On Moody's, it was a harsh, clear yellow that reminded Harry of tinted Veritaserum. Like the others, it was gray in the middle. A thread snaked away from it, coalescing around Harry's right wrist.

The buzz faded, and a deep chime shook the chamber. Harry waited for it to trail off, and lifted his eyes to the next pair in line. Madam Marchbanks looked pleased and hopeful, though Harry thought she was trying to hide the expression. Lucius tilted his head and stared Harry down, revealing no emotion at all.

“Griselda Marchbanks,” said Harry, “Light witch, Elder of the Wizengamot, older than Albus Dumbledore, friend of the hanarz. Lucius Malfoy, Dark wizard, Death Eater, truce-dance ally of mine—” He might have tried to stop what he said next, but the ritual compelled a litany of titles from him, and it slipped out before Harry could stop it. “Smug bastard.”

Lucius raised his eyebrows, even as the bond between him and Madam Marchbanks sprang eagerly into being. On his side, it was gleaming black, with perhaps just a hint of purple, the color of a Hungarian Horntail’s scales. Madam Marchbanks shone gold and silver, as like a unicorn as anyone human Harry had seen. This bond aimed for Harry’s brow, and tied itself there.

This time, the accompanying chime made Hawthorn nearly falter from her place in the ritual. Harry frowned. That really is not supposed to happen. He turned cautiously to Hawthorn and Tybalt, keeping one eye on the walls as he spoke, wondering if perhaps this room had traps on it that he hadn’t detected when he chose it. But why would the goblins not have known about them? And why would they have let him use this place if they had known?

“Tybalt Starrise,” he said, and Tybalt all but preened. “Son of Alba Starrise, annoyer of Augustus, pledged ally of mine, wild Light wizard. Hawthorn Parkinson, Dark witch, Red Death, formal ally of my family, runner by the light of the moon.” He felt the bond swelling into being, and the last words were abruptly hard to speak. Harry pushed himself through. He had known this would happen, at least, as the ritual went on and he handled more and more magic. This was nothing compared to what he would feel when he had to join the bonds all together and then use them to transfer the goblins’ web. He shut his eyes for a moment, to let him endure.

This bond howled, like Hawthorn hunting on a full moon night, and was unexpectedly pale on her end, though Harry supposed it might be the sheen of light off a knife. Tybalt blazed both gold and black, like a bumblebee. Harry staggered a little as a secondary bond shot away from it and towards his heart, but managed to keep his feet.

This chime came into his bones, and Harry heard a hiss, deep and angry, that of a defensive guardian. He snapped his head up and searched the room anxiously with his eyes, but there was nothing save the waiting goblins—who weren't alarmed—and the waiting wizards and witches, peering at him curiously.

Harry nodded, and faced Snape and McGonagall, and began speaking. The hiss remained, growing louder, rushing at him. Well, he would deal with it when it got here.

“Minerva McGonagall, Light witch, descendant of Lady Calypso, Deputy Headmistress, chosen friend.” The last words had to well out from between his tightly clenched teeth. Abrupt pressure had gripped his head, as though someone had fastened a crown of iron there. Harry could feel Regulus shouting something, but he had to go through the ritual, and couldn't attend to his words. “Severus Snape, Dark wizard, Death Eater, Potions Master, beloved guardian.”

The bond between Snape and McGonagall exploded into being, a waterfall of deep, poisonous green racing away from Snape's side and meeting the deep red hue from McGonagall, twining and then snapping, a sound like teeth or claws on rock. The secondary bond from it coiled towards Harry's left wrist.

The chime hurt Harry's head this time, and the hiss grew louder, and when he opened his eyes, a phantom basilisk was slithering towards him along the bond, straight for his left hand.

Immediately, Harry felt stupid for not seeing it before. Salazar Slytherin established this web. Of course he would have put some measures into place to insure no one could simply destroy it.

The basilisk was growing more present every moment, a snake with dark purple scales and gleaming yellow eyes. Harry felt himself shake

as the eyes locked on him. It was not yet real enough to destroy him, but it would be soon, and then it could easily turn on and kill the others.

There was one thing that Slytherin could not have possibly guessed about the destroyer of the web, though, and Harry used that advantage now, hissing at the basilisk in Parseltongue.

“What is the meaning of this? Will Slytherin’s pet harm one with Slytherin’s talent”

The basilisk gave a vicious, whip-like motion of its neck, and then shut its eyes. Harry was vaguely aware of the shouts from the others, and of silver flashes next to them which were probably goblin arrows. The bonds weren’t disrupted, though. Harry and the others had passed too far into the ritual to move from their places now. The thread between Snape and McGonagall lashed around his left wrist and coiled there, hard enough to cut off his circulation. The basilisk lay in the rectangle between the Light and Dark sides—only about ten feet long, nowhere near as large as the one in the Chamber of Secrets—and hissed softly at him.

“Beg pardon. I did not know that you could speak to us. I was told that when someone disrupted my lair, that person was my rightful prey. My master told me so,” the snake added, as though attacking a Parselmouth were such a severe breach of etiquette that this was the only way to answer it.

Harry felt his lip curl in spite of himself. He could only imagine what Syllarana or the Many would have said about a snake so willing to crouch at someone else’s feet and accept a Parselmouth as a master rather than a partner.

“Your master is long dead,” he said. “And I want to change your residing place. You reside within the web, do you not?”

“Within the realm of the spider,” said the basilisk. “Yes. And that realm cannot be shredded. My master told me so.” It was swaying faintly faster now, and the false eyelids that dimmed its deadly gaze

were pulsing with flickers of light. Harry suspected the impulse to open them and gaze was becoming hard for the snake to resist.

“I am changing that realm,” he said. “Not destroying it. If you help me, then I will leave you alive. If you do not, then you will die. Do you understand me? I bear you no ill will, but I will not allow you to harm or hurt anyone around me, either.”

“Why not?” the basilisk demanded. “They are not all of the Dark, and only one of them can speak to me.”

Harry did shoot a short glance at Lucius then, just visible over the basilisk’s intensely agitated coils. Lucius had a very odd expression on his face. He could understand the conversation, certainly, but he didn’t seem to know what to feel about it.

“Because I say so,” said Harry. “And I could kill you. Do you need any better reason? I am offering you a choice, which is more than your master gave you when he put you here.”

“I understand,” the basilisk hissed softly. “I choose to help. And it feels so wonderful to be real again, to sense and hear. Let me stay. I will help.”

Harry was unsure if the snake could help, since the addition of a thirteenth presence to the ritual would unbalance it in favor of the Dark. “As you will,” he said. “Be ready to assist me.”

The basilisk slithered smoothly out of the center of the rectangle—crossing the boundaries of the ritual without disrupting it, as it was part of the web and not part of this new formation of bonds—and around behind Harry. “Keep your eyes shut,” Harry added, remembering just in time that he wouldn’t be able to see the basilisk now if it decided to stare at the others, and then turned his attention to the bond around his left wrist.

With some persuasion, it loosened and became more like the others. Harry suspected at least part of the resistance had come from Snape, who was scowling ferociously at him and had probably wanted to destroy the basilisk. Harry gave him a reprimanding glance, and then

jerked his attention back and focused carefully on the bonds on his wrists, around his brow, at his heart, at his temple, and the one that sprang from the center of his chest, just below his heart bond, and connected him to Draco.

This was too important, too delicate a task, for him to leave any bit of his focus dangling outside the middle.

Harry took a deep breath, and then threw his magic forward, and to the side, and upwards, and down, and to the left, and to the right. The six bonds shimmered and shone ferociously, and then Harry was seeing them all gathered in an equally fierce lump behind his eyes, their colors running together.

He gripped them and conjoined them, all of them at once, every way that the twelve presences in the ritual could possibly be bound, himself to Hawthorn and Fawkes to Draco and Moody to Lucius and McGonagall to Madam Marchbanks and Narcissa to Regulus and Tybalt to Snape and himself to Lucius and McGonagall to Hawthorn and Narcissa to Tybalt and...

He made himself a crossroads, forcing his thoughts to hold all the myriad, beautiful patterns in his mind's eye. His own magic rose to take up more and more of the burden, supporting the bonds, maintaining them, keeping the other ritual participants' minds from panicking at the sudden intimacy, helping him memorize the patterns instead of go crazy thinking about them. More and more rose, and he had only more to give. And the ritual itself helped, of course, hammering the molds into his mind and telling him what to do next and pulling on his magic.

Harry took a deep breath when he thought he had it. All those bonds, all the possible similarities between them and all the differences smoothed over into similarities, trembled and glowed before him. He could know the thoughts of any witch or wizard in the room at the moment, and, through Madam Marchbanks, the thoughts of any goblin.

This was part of the reason this was a Light ritual, of course, aside from the sense of cooperation inherent in it. It required a trust that

many Dark wizards, proud and solitary, would never give to one another, and an initiator capable of resisting the temptation to stare into other minds.

Harry held the ball of all their thoughts for a moment, and wondered if this was what it was like to be a Light Lord, a true Light Lord, not the pitiful imitation that Dumbledore was, living from moment to moment with power and exquisitely aware of how one could affect others at all times.

Then he smiled. No. Because even Light Lords use compulsion, if they think it's best. This is what it's like to be me, acting the Light part in the middle of this particular ritual.

He knew the patterns. He took a moment more to breathe.

Then he called on his magic, called on it as he had not since his battle with Tom Riddle in his second year, drew more and more of it up from the middle of himself, and spread it out and to the pile of coins that lay waiting in the corner of the room, and the web on the goblins, and the stone walls of the chamber.

And the coins and the web and the stone answered.

He felt the coins lift, spinning around each other, hurrying into precise lanes. In moments, his magic expanding his thoughts so that he could conceive what would normally not have been possible, or possible only in isolated moments, he knew they had formed the patterns of exchange in Gringotts. They were moving in imitation of the way that they passed from wizard to goblin hands, in and out of the bank. This was a necessary component of the web's replacement, since it was bound to the way that the bank did business, every removal and every deposit of money reinforcing it.

Harry knew he could not hope to mimic all the millions of transactions down the centuries since Slytherin had tied the web. That did not matter. He had only to convince the web that this was the real thing.

The web trembled, and began to move. Harry slitted his eyes, and saw the white glow around the goblins mounting like a sunrise,

soaring up and up, turning the air around the ritual participants clear. It was rising, loosing them of its own free will, drifting up and wafting towards the coins. The goblins themselves were almost all standing still, and doing nothing interesting right now. The illusion of busy money attracted the web instead.

Harry felt his mind, or, more properly, his magic, strain. There was no way that he could be holding all these patterns in his memory at once, naturally. But the magic could contain the ritual bonds, which provided the power for the lifting of the web, and the patterns of the coins, which provided a place for the web to go. Harry did not feel quite human right now. He suspected he wouldn't be able to remember exactly how he felt afterwards, either, as he hadn't been able to remember exactly the experience he'd gone through in the Maze.

He asked his magic for still more.

He felt his heart give a single hard beat, but the magic answered him, deep and welling, lifting and pouring through him from his reserves. Harry reached for the stone walls, and began to blast imitation vaults in them.

Chips of stone soared past his face, when he could see what was in front of his face. His vision pulsed in and out, sometimes showing him what was happening in the room, sometimes showing him what was actually behind his head—the web hovering over the zooming coins and watching them in fascination—and sometimes showing him that immense ball of gathered bonds and magic and trust. Harry could hear, though, his breathing lifting and becoming more and more labored. His magic might give out before the end, at the rate he was going.

What magic cannot do, will must.

Harry locked his will and pushed it forward. The last of the vaults were blasted now, and he remembered what the hanarz had told him. Every use of a key in a vault increased the web, too.

He reached out, confidently weaving a glamour, and his vision and the world were steady but beating, like a heart, repeating what he saw in ordered patterns, bonds and coins and web and illusion—

The illusion put what looked like metallic doors into place over the vault entrances, and then conjured keys. Harry tied off the glamour, and watched in amusement as the keys began to bustle about, “unlocking” the vault entrances and then “locking” them again, all a shadow-play to attract and hold the web’s attention. Harry was panting from the strain, but he did enjoy the irony of employing what was technically Dark magic, because it was deceptive, in the midst of a Light ritual.

The web turned to look at the vaults, and Harry felt it writhing, the white tendrils uncurling behind it. Its main object was not confinement of the goblins, but to reinforce itself through the business of the bank. Slytherin had made sure of it, and had, through that, made it seemingly impossible that anyone could free the southern goblins without shutting down Gringotts itself.

Now, though, that was working against his intentions. The web was a mindless thing, not sentient, a creature of fascinations and shallow emotions. It moved slowly, slowly, closer to the whizzing coins and the phantom doors.

Harry could feel his arms trembling. He told himself that was only an illusion, too. He was feeling the strain in his body, particularly his chest, but he wasn’t holding anything up. He spun more and more magic out of himself, and into the temptation for the web.

The web sprang.

Harry cried out as its tendrils uncurled from the goblins altogether, and wrapped greedily around the new illusion of the bank. He moved, timing things precisely, letting the web settle into place and hum happily before he held up the ball of all the conjoined bonds, all the conjoined magic, and flung it into the center of the illusion.

It landed, freely given magic, freely given sacrifice, which in the original ritual would have tied the curse into place on the new

volunteer. Instead, here, it gave the illusion of the bank a heart, and made it permanent. Harry could feel the web's "belief" in the illusion form fully and formidably, and knew the goblins' freedom was complete.

He took a deep breath of relief.

"Thank you. That was a beautiful place of magic to see. I have missed magic. And now I shall guard the web, which is what my master asked me to do."

Harry lifted his eyes, blinking, and saw the basilisk slithering rapidly towards the newly-placed web. It grew less real as it moved, tattering into purple-black strands of mist and one glimpse of yellow eyes that still made Harry shiver. Then it wrapped itself around the web and vanished.

Harry managed a tired grin. If anyone did try to tamper with the southern goblins' web after this, perhaps move it back to them, they would find the basilisk hissing and probably staring or biting them to death before they could do anything about it. And it was extremely unlikely that Voldemort, the only other Parselmouth in Britain, would care enough to do anything about it.

And now he had to turn around and look at other things, because he was not done yet.

Harry reached out, carefully, and began unbraiding the bonds that still tied to him, going in reverse order. A hissing twist, and the bond around his left wrist parted, and McGonagall and Snape sagged. A howl, and Hawthorn and Tybalt were blinking at each other, as if they didn't know what had happened. A roar, and Lucius and Madam Marchbanks were stepping away from each other with mutual expressions of distaste. A buzz, and Narcissa and Moody were free; Moody showed more relief than Narcissa at their parting.

Fawkes trilled, helping Harry ease the bond between Regulus and himself apart. Regulus sighed. Thank goodness. That phoenix was singing at me all the damn time. I don't know how you stand it, having him bonded to you.

Harry shrugged, a motion that made him gasp in pain—he had not realized how tense his body was—and reached out to the bond between himself and Draco. Though he had not thought much on the other boy while they were bound together, this ritual would have been impossible without him, he thought, meeting Draco's eyes across the rectangle. That steady, fundamental tie of trust had let him do everything else.

Draco laid his hand gently on the bond. Harry shivered. It felt as though the hand had reached into his chest and pressed upon his heart. It felt—not so much good as sweet.

“Can't this stay?” Draco whispered. Harry heard him clearly, despite the distance between them. “I wouldn't mind.”

Harry shook his head slightly, and smiled, and released the connection. He caught a look of disappointment on Draco's face before he turned away, but he was sure he had made the right decision. Both he and Draco would have sickened of each other before long, forced to live in such intimacy. It would have made Draco's empathy seem like nothing.

Harry used the moment when the ritual still buzzed and hummed through him to look at the hanarz near the doors. Her face was painted with an expression of joy that even he, inexperienced at reading goblins, could recognize. She bowed her head slightly to him. Earlier, she had confirmed to Harry that she and her people would not be hasty. They would keep up the business of Gringotts as usual at first. Slowly, they would begin changing the terms of their relationship with wizards. Now that they were free, they could afford to take their time. It had been the web, the lack of choices in dealing with wizards, which made them impatient.

Harry whispered the words that would end the ritual. “In the name of sunrise, this ritual is done, and the transfer complete.”

The buzz in his head ended as the power withdrew, slipping away from him like water, and the very last expanded boundaries of his mind contracted violently. Harry dropped to his knees, shaking. His

body ached viciously. He could actually feel his lungs working to take in enough air, and his vision blurred and swam. Magical exhaustion, he knew, the kind he had experienced when he aided Connor on the Quidditch Pitch in first year.

He heard Snape snapping something out, and hoped, fuzzily, that his guardian was hurting no one's feelings as he scooped him off the floor.

He had done what he came here to do. The goblins were free, and he had exerted himself to the utmost in freeing them. That meant that he had no reason to stay awake. He really had done all he could, with no selfish holding back.

Harry slipped into sleep, fully aware that he would be smiling. There could be no better cause for tiring himself out than this.

Interlude: And Soaring Ever Singest

June 1st, 1995

Dear Potter:

Hello! How are you? Have you had any dreams of blueberry pies lately? My lord continues to wake me up when I am about to reach mine, so I must confess that the taste of blueberries is something my mouth has sorely missed, almost as much as it misses the taste of blood.

But that is not what I was writing to talk to you about. I am quite sure that you do not care about Death Eaters who miss blueberries. You might care about the blood, and I hope someday to taste a Crucio from your wand and see whether the taste you put into my mouth is different from the one my lord and Our Lady of Pain create.

No, I am writing to tell you three things. They are all important, so perhaps you should pay close attention. On the other hand, perhaps I am crossing my eyes at you on the other side of the parchment. After all, you cannot be sure, can you? I often sit with the letters I receive and try to imagine the expressions on the faces of those who sent them to me. I am never sure if I am right.

First, what you have accomplished so far is quite impressive. Higher still and higher from the earth thou springest, like a cloud of fire; the blue deep thou wingest, and singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest. So sang the poet whose heart would not burn, the one who by the time he was nineteen had already begun to sing of revolution, and who died when he was not quite twice your age, drowned in roaring water. Impressive accomplishments for one so young, and your own heart is a soaring, singing thing by now, I imagine. It should be. The summer is so near, the summer of your soul.

Teach me half the gladness that thy brain must know. I wish you could. It would make my own madness more harmonious.

Second, you should still watch the sun, always. On the other hand, perhaps you should watch the moon. Or was it the stars? I am afraid I

always mix these things up. Dire warnings are not my forte. On the other hand, I am quite good at causing pain, and playing games.

Everything is a game, Potter. Never forget that.

Third, I wish to extend an invitation to you. The time is not important; I will name the time in some future letter. But the place is dearly important to me. I wish to meet on that beach in Northumberland where we first danced together.

Tell me you will be there. Perhaps you will bring blueberries? Or blood? Either will be good.

In the game,

Evan Rosier.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: One Sacrifice Too Many

Draco leaned against the wall outside the classroom door and waited patiently. He could have gone into the room and been closer to Harry, but Harry was only telling a story that Draco already knew to another class of students from all Houses. Draco knew he would have felt less comforted by Harry's presence than annoyed with all the other people who were sharing it.

Besides, the fact that he'd stayed away from Harry all day would lend his request more weight when he made it.

The lesson shifted as he listened. Now Harry was teaching the other students simple dueling spells, allegedly because their Defense Against the Dark Arts curriculum was inadequate with two teachers in one year—and a third one having to take over next year, when Karkaroff would go back to Durmstrang. Draco knew the truth, of course, because Harry had confessed it to him when he asked. Connor had supposedly heard from Krum that for the Third Task, it would be useful if the champions knew plenty of dueling spells. To avoid letting on that he knew anything about it, Connor had asked Harry to tutor him in common with the others.

Draco couldn't quite forbear edging nearer the door and peering in at Harry, to see what he was teaching them now.

Harry's brother had just managed to deflect a simple cutting hex with a Shield Charm. He was laughing out loud, as if that simple accomplishment was worth startling a whole room full of other people. Harry stood across from him, smiling at him and shaking his head.

Draco smiled in turn and tilted his head so that more of the sunlight from Harry's emotions fell on his face. Simple things like this made Harry so happy. Draco thought, with one part of his mind, that Harry really should find some employment more fit for him—he couldn't strike with one tenth of his power, since the other students were so weak—but he'd been distant and preoccupied since a few days after the successful completion of the ritual to free the southern goblins. It was only right that he have some joy now.

Harry was dancing attendance on Loony Lovegood next, urging her to make a trial of the Shield Charm against his cutting hex. Loony only got halfway through the spell before she started talking dreamily to her scarf, and Harry had to pull up his hex. For a moment, his emotions shifted towards worry like snow blowing in Draco's face. Then they steadied, and he shook his head and moved towards Smith and Granger, who'd apparently patched up their little love affair when Draco wasn't looking.

Draco tensed his shoulders. I do want to just drag him out of there. But wait. Be patient. Once he hears what I want, I know he'll need a few hours to think about it. Best if I just let him have this time now, and he doesn't get irritated at me for pushing too soon.

Draco waited, immobile, and patient, really, even if he had to chew on his tongue to stay quiet more than once as Harry responded with deep calm to Smith's sniping comments. Draco was an expert at reading Harry in a way that none of the others in the classroom were, and he could see that the calm was as false as his own patience. Harry's shoulders kept tightening, and he smoothed out the cruel edges that tried to wrinkle his voice again and again.

I think he'll agree to this, Draco thought hopefully. Merlin knows that he needs this as much as I do.

Finally, the other students left the classroom for dinner, but not before asking Harry for more lessons the next day. Harry waved them off with talk about studying for exams in the library. Draco's eyes narrowed. He's been doing that for the past week, and he always looks paler afterward.

Not this time.

More than one person gave him an odd glance as they streamed past him, but Draco ignored them. The only other student whose opinion he cared about was waiting until everyone had left. He could see that, and that would just mean Draco would wait until everyone had left, too.

Harry peered around the door, finally, fully five minutes after his brother and the Weasel had gone to dinner, cracking immature Gryffindorish jokes. He stared around the corner, then jumped when he saw Draco. Draco straightened up and looked at him calmly.

"You could have come in, you know," said Harry, after a few moments of silence. "No one would have minded."

Draco sighed. "I have something to ask you," he said. "Something that needs to be said in private, but I don't know if I could have waited if I'd come into the classroom." He studied Harry's tight, pale face, and nodded, fully convinced that this would help Harry as much as him.

Harry grinned. "Is this about your birthday gift, Draco? Yes, I know it's your birthday tomorrow. I'm not going to tell you what I got you beforehand."

"It's about my birthday," said Draco, "but this time, I wanted to ask for a specific gift."

Harry arched his eyebrows. "You don't trust me to get you something you'll like?"

Draco had not actually counted on Harry having bought or made a gift already. Greed warred with stronger greed. Really, he wanted both presents, if he could be assured of a reasonable chance of getting them both...

But the stronger greed—which, Draco told himself, had its roots in concern for Harry as much as anything else—won. He shook his head. "It's not that. But I really want something that only you can make for me."

"Something magical, then," Harry summed up. "Not a nundu, Draco, or a way of casting multiple hexes at people who annoy you."

That would be useful. Draco squashed his longing. "No, not that."

Harry nodded at him. "All right. What do you want, then?"

Draco found that it wasn't as easy to ask for it, after all, confronted by those wide and utterly quizzical green eyes. But where courage might have failed him, love and desire stepped in. "I want you to create the same kind of magical bond that we shared in the ritual to free the goblins," he said, "just for one day. From midnight tonight to midnight tomorrow. That should do it."

Harry's face turned pale, and Draco saw a brief flash of green light, one of Harry's usual signs of wanting to back away. Draco nodded slowly. That clinched it, then. Harry hadn't ended that bond for a reason that had anything to do with Draco. It was his own fear he'd been thinking of, his own reluctance.

Draco held his gaze and waited. He knew exactly why Harry was frightened. The bond had connected them so nearly that they'd shared physical sensations along with emotions; Draco had even received a brief glimpse of what it must be like to hold as much magic as Harry had. It wasn't something that could be hidden or backed away from. Harry retained some secrets even now, looked away and sent people's gazes in the other direction. Draco thought he had good reason for some of it, but he didn't see why he should be shut out. He was the one who had made the promise never to hurt Harry's mother, and had since made it about Harry's father as well. He didn't go around betraying Harry's secrets to other people. He could feel Harry's trust in him during the ritual, rock-solid, so deep that it hadn't even required a description of him to cement the bond, the way it had with the others. He thought that this link was a perfectly fine birthday gift. It didn't press Harry too far, because it built on what Harry had already given him.

And it would give Draco back something, if only for a day, that he'd been longing for and missing since the ritual. Perhaps it was un-Malfoyish to admit how deeply that hour of connection had affected him. He didn't really care. It wasn't as though Harry was about to run to Lucius and spill this secret, either.

Harry closed his eyes and let out a low, shuddering breath. "I—why do you want this, Draco?" he asked.

Draco scowled at him. "Now you're just acting stupid, Harry. You know why I want this. I understand that you're afraid, and—" his throat burned to say it, but only from reluctance, not from speaking the truth "—if you really want me to, I'll choose something else. But I'm not going to let you lie and play dumb and say that you don't know something you know perfectly well." He tapped the side of his head with his finger. "Exams are coming up, you know. You ought to practice retaining facts, not ignoring them, or else they'll slip out of your head in the middle of the test."

Harry laughed, though the sound was hollow. He looked up slowly, blinking. "I—let me think about it, Draco, all right?" he asked.

That was the period of a few hours Draco had expected. He nodded, and fell into step beside Harry as they walked down to dinner. He didn't make an attempt to touch him. Since Halloween, he'd become adept, again, at knowing when to back off, and he knew Harry would see a touch right now as pushing his case.

Harry shoved his dinner around on his plate. Normally, he was quite all right with shepherd's pie, but now he didn't feel like eating.

He darted a glance at Draco, and then looked away. Draco was steadily eating, pretending that nothing was wrong. He'd made his request, and Harry knew he wouldn't take it back unless Harry asked him to take it back. And Harry didn't want to.

But if I let him that close to me, then he'll probably find out about my plan, he thought.

Good, said Regulus, startling him. They'd had another argument a week ago, and he hadn't been around Harry's head much since then. It's a stupid plan. I hope he has a go at you and makes you see reason.

You know I can't think of any other way to accomplish it, Harry thought, and stabbed viciously at a piece of pie. Millicent glared at him as the bits splattered her. Harry ducked his head and remained like that until she looked away. I've tried and tried. I don't like this way,

either, but the northern goblins have to be free, and their web is unmanageable otherwise.

You don't have to do this so quickly, Regulus urged him, reiterating the terms of their argument a week before. The goblins will wait. Just because their cousins are free doesn't mean they'll demand you free them the next month. You can study some more and find out another way with time. It's your own sense of the fitness of things that's rushing you, Harry, not anyone else.

Harry couldn't say anything to that, but he didn't see that it mattered. So his own sense of the fitness of things had made him study the web linked to the linchpins and decide to remove it in this way. It had also made him tutor Connor in dueling spells, and try to reconcile with their father, and befriend Draco. His sense of the fitness of things was usually correct.

And he feared that he was giving Draco's request such serious consideration because he wanted that sense of connection back, too, and that was weak and silly, to give in just because he wanted to.

He managed to force some of the pie down his throat, and wondered what he was going to say to Draco.

In particular details, at least. In general outlines, he already knew. Draco sat on his bed, swinging his foot and waiting for Harry to come out of the loo, and wondered why everything in his life had to be so bloody complicated.

Well, not everything. But, right now, both his relationship with his father and his relationship with Harry were complicated, and those were bloody enough.

Lucius was still not pleased that Draco had gone to Walpurgis Night. Malfoys didn't do that. They didn't dance around like idiots, and they didn't expose themselves to wild magic that could make them behave like idiots, either. They stayed safely inside their homes and ignored the wild Dark, Draco supposed. His father had not actually said what

they did, only relayed several stern injunctions concerning what they would not do.

Draco had written him a rude letter back, and ignored his father the day of the ritual to free the goblins. Silence had settled between them since then. He knew one of them would have to break it eventually, but he was determined not to be the one. He was going to be fifteen tomorrow. That was old enough to have a say in his own actions. His father certainly demanded he be responsible when dealing with consequences, and had since he was seven years old. Draco didn't see why choosing to court a certain set of consequences was an exception to that rule.

And Harry...

Draco leaned back on his pillow, and folded his arms behind his head, and thought.

He might have pushed Harry too far, asking for this bond to be restored. Everything was so delicate, so on a middle path between too far—when Harry would back away from him—and not far enough—when Harry might be willing to give him more, but wouldn't unless Draco asked for it.

And all the way through, there was the undercurrent of fear that he was pushing for things Harry really wouldn't give him, but which his bloody sacrificial instincts demanded he hand over anyway. And of course Harry, the idiot, didn't have any ability to just say no where someone else would have when he felt unduly pressured.

And Draco did sometimes resent that he had to do so much work, and that he could feel Harry's emotions, but Harry still lied by omission or just refused to tell him certain things that were on his mind.

So complicated, Draco thought, even as the loo's door swung open and Harry walked out. But I love him.

And by the look on Harry's face and the wind pouring around his body, he'd nerved himself up to an answer, one way or the other. Draco sat up and tried to look as neutral as possible.

"Yes," Harry whispered. "All right."

Draco smiled. It would be dishonest not to, since Harry knew this would make him happy. And being honest with Harry was always better, except when he did push too far and put him in a situation that would be uncomfortable...

Bloody complicated thing, Draco thought, and nodded. "All right. Do you want to do it at midnight?"

"No," said Harry. "From now—" it was nearly eleven o'clock "—until midnight tomorrow is fine."

He put out a hand, and gathered his magic around himself. Draco watched him in silent awe. He wondered if Harry even had a clue how beautiful he was when he did this. Since he'd confined his magic to his body, it no longer burned around him in an aura of roses, but it poured out of him more smoothly, and the bond that stretched a moment later from Harry's chest to Draco's, gold and green, curved like a leaping dolphin. Draco could not imagine anyone turning away from it in disgust, the way that Harry's mother had implied most people would.

Draco felt the bond settle into place, and the impatient longing that had gnawed at him, bad as a craving for a nap in History of Magic, washed abruptly away. He took a few deep breaths. The feeling was deeper than he'd thought it would be. Of course, with no ritual to take attention away from it or mask it this time, he could feel the full glory of it.

From the expression on Harry's face, so could he, and he was caught somewhere between wonder and terror. He did want this, Draco realized with a blink, and that was another reason he hadn't wanted to grant the request.

Bloody prat, Draco thought with affection. He never does think he can have anything he wants.

Harry swung his head sharply and met his eyes. Draco blinked. Well, yes. He heard my thoughts, didn't he? Draco didn't think it'd been all of them, but Harry nodded his head a moment later, and that confirmed that at least focused, directed thoughts could make it across to him.

I like this, Draco thought gleefully. Too bad exams aren't tomorrow, or we could cheat, and no one could catch us.

Harry rolled his eyes, and, to Draco's delight, responded comfortably in mental speech, without even trying to speak aloud. Perhaps it came from practice with Regulus Black and his phoenix, but it was still a good sign. It'd be pretty obvious. The bond is visible, remember?

Can you hide it? Draco wasn't at all ashamed of the visible link being there, but he would rather be the only one who knew the degree of his connection with Harry tomorrow. He could feel Harry's mind opening gently, and the effort of speaking with each other this way was becoming less and less all the time. His emotions were stronger and clearer, and when Draco raised a hand and touched the bond, Harry started and shivered as though a hand had run across his hair.

I—yes. Harry peered at him. You're sure?

Draco sent a wordless answer of happiness this time, and watched Harry blink as he realized he'd just felt it, rather than read it. He shivered again, and murmured a glamour incantation aloud, as though trying to step out of the unusual intimacy the bond had given them. The bond shimmered and dimmed to a thin green and gold thread which could easily be mistaken for a sheen of drifting sunlight.

"There," said Harry, also aloud.

Pleasant dreams, Draco whispered, and discovered another side effect of the bond in that moment. He could shade his voice so that Harry could tell he was absolutely sincere, and the statement arrived

in his mind without any sign of a lie. Draco smiled at Harry. He was delighted, and saw no reason to hide it. For once, Harry would have to stop driving himself into a frenzy about his secrets, whatever they were. Draco thought it would be good for him. He was sure that Harry's pallor and agitation this last week had something to do with a secret.

Harry swallowed. Thank you, he said, also sincere, and Happy birthday, and made his way to his own bed.

Draco touched the bond again. It gave a low hum, and he felt a shiver of sweetness in his own chest. He rolled under the covers, and knew when Harry settled into place in his bed, the physical sensations arriving a moment after his did, like an echo.

This is only for one day, he told himself sternly. Don't get used to it.

But even that was not enough to keep him from slipping into the deepest and most content sleep he'd had for two weeks.

Harry woke early the next morning, and lay there listening to the bond hum.

He didn't want to move, and not only because Draco's mind was curled in a purring, dreaming ball in his head, or because he could feel the extra warmth and comfort of blankets beyond those around his own limbs.

Merlin, the bond felt so good.

Harry shivered. He hadn't paid that much attention to Regulus when he'd spoken yesterday, occupied more with his own feelings about what would happen when the bond was reinstated, but now Regulus was quiet, and Fawkes had his head tucked beneath his wing, and Harry had memories and fragments of dreams scattered in his head, dreams in which Draco had participated. There was no one to argue with, and no one to make him deny what he really thought by bringing it up first and forcing him on the defensive.

He had wanted this back. He had wanted the bond to be with Draco, and not anyone else. For all that their presence and magic in his head had been fascinating, he hadn't missed Hawthorn or Tybalt or even Snape the way he'd missed Draco.

He could pretend this request was a sacrifice, but it wasn't, not really. He had done this mostly because he wanted to.

And that frightened him. If he chose one thing he wanted, not because someone forced him to it but in preference to other things, what might that not lead to?

Harry had the dim feeling that he'd had an answer to this before, that he'd seen in the Maze that it would lead to nothing bad, but it was hard to remember when the bond was actually there, and the prospect of spending a whole day with Draco opened up before him like the vision of sunrise from a mountaintop. The answers weren't simple, no matter how much he wanted just to say that this was right or it was wrong. He shook, despite the warmth, and closed his eyes tightly.

The ball of emotions in his mind expanded, and then Draco was awake. He took a moment to feel around for the bond, and Harry jolted as that chord in his chest was touched. He lifted up his head and looked through the curtains of his bed, to find Draco grinning at him from his own.

Good morning, said Draco's voice cheerfully in his head. You had sweet dreams, didn't you?

Harry nodded unwillingly.

So now we'll have a good breakfast. Draco paused for a moment, then added, And I promise at some point that I'll stop acting so much like a child, but let me enjoy it for the moment. I feel like a first-year. All I want to do is giggle and run around. He winked at Harry and climbed out of bed.

Harry let out a careful breath. The thought that Draco had been acting like a child was one that he'd barely been conscious of himself,

certainly not one he'd sent to Draco on purpose along the bond. This was leaving their minds more and more open to each other. By nightfall, Harry wondered if he'd have any secrets at all.

I don't see why you need to have any secrets from me, unless you really want to, Draco said. Do you want to? I meant what I said, Harry. You can end the bond, if it makes you too uncomfortable.

It made him uncomfortable, Harry thought, but also more comfortable than he'd been since the ritual, or at least since he awoke from his magical exhaustion and found himself missing Draco.

Good.

Draco padded in to use the shower, as Harry deduced from the ghostly feel of warm water on his skin a moment later. He decided to remain in bed for right now, even though he was very thoroughly awake. He needed some time to consider the situation, to prepare himself to get through the day, and to try and decide what the hell he wanted—for Draco to find out what he was hiding, or not. It was impossible that he should want two contradictory things at the same time, and yet it was happening.

Draco found himself quickly getting used to the doubled sensations at the breakfast table. Harry's taste buds were different from his, finding less blandness in the porridge and more taste in the sausages, but just enough to add a piquancy to the meal. Draco enjoyed it more than he had any breakfast in a long time.

He sneaked a glance at Harry, and caught him looking at him. Harry ducked his head. A blush spread over his cheeks. Draco blinked in amusement. He got both the faint sting from the echoed heat, and the sensation of sand in his teeth that always showed up whenever Harry was irritated with himself.

"Problems?" he asked mildly.

"I'm having a hard time adjusting, I guess." Harry stirred his spoon through his porridge. "I don't know how you live with the empathy all the time. I suppose I can't blame you for focusing your emotions on

just me. Imagine feeling these sensations from everyone all at once.” He looked revolted, and Draco could touch the underlying tenor of his thoughts. I wouldn’t be able to stand it.

“I had no choice but to get used to the empathy,” said Draco, with a shrug. “With this, though...” Because he couldn’t help himself, and he’d always been more inclined to indulge his whims than suppress them like a good little boy, he touched the cord that extended from the center of his chest again.

Harry gave another one of those shivers, but this time, Draco knew it was a motion of pleasure. His thoughts murmured and twitched and collided. Harry seemed to have a constant running argument in his head, the thought of which wearied Draco far more than feeling someone else’s emotions. It was fascinating as an outsider, though, and he watched Harry arguing that of course it was natural he should spend so much time thinking of the bond when it occupied so much of his attention, and then arguing that he should think about other things in case other people needed his help, and then arguing that he was helping Draco, and did it matter that he was also helping himself in the process?—

When do you get any rest? Draco asked, amazed and amused, and letting both the emotions flow into Harry. It wasn’t as though he could hold them back. Unlike Harry, he saw no reason to try, either.

Harry jumped, but responded in the same way, evidently not willing to reveal the existence of the bond to their yearmates by answering a question Draco hadn’t asked. At night, when most other people do.

I meant during the day. That argument in your head would wear me out. Draco chewed thoughtfully on an unidentifiable bit from his porridge while he awaited an explanation. Actually, he could feel out the edges of that explanation, but he wanted to hear the words Harry would put it in.

Harry stared at his plate in silence for a moment, then shrugged. I don’t know. I suppose I’m always keeping an eye on myself.

Why?

Harry turned his head sharply, and the answer, half-formed, slid straight into Draco's head. Harry was afraid of what he might do if he wasn't constantly weighing the consequences to every small action. His magic was too great, and he didn't know enough about acting like a normal wizard to avoid constant mistakes. He was afraid...

He was afraid of being selfish.

Draco blinked. Oh. Well, now that I know that, that makes the argument in your head easier to settle.

Does it? Harry was all but snapping at him now, drawing his head up and his shoulders back in offended pride. Draco found that adorable, and Harry picked up on that, and reacted strongly, and Draco reassured him, all without much more than glimmers of half-conscious thought flashing between them.

Of course. Your selfishness isn't something to be afraid of, Harry. You're a good person. You wouldn't suddenly start hurting everyone else because you decided to take one thing you wanted. Draco reached out and caught his hand, turning it over so that he could see the pulse in Harry's wrist. It was jumping erratically. He could feel it, somewhere in the roof of his mouth, if he really concentrated. Draco wondered what he would be feeling by the time that night came, if they would even be two distinct and separate people anymore. And with me right here, I could tell you if you made a mistake or did hurt someone else and didn't notice.

But why should you have to bear that burden? I lean on you for too much already.

Draco made an exasperated noise, though he wasn't sure if it was aloud or only in his head. I'll tell you when it's too much, Harry. And the bargain goes both ways, you know. I intend for you to tell me when I'm making mistakes, like turning my empathy too much on you. I intend for you to give me things I want. You seem to think you'll swallow me alive. Not when I'm sticking in your throat and rather protesting all the way down, I think, and not when I'm trying to embrace you in the same way.

Harry tried to pull his hand free. Draco asked why, and caught a jumble of frayed words. Stupid...this sounds silly...doesn't make sense...

And it did, Draco answered him, and if the words were stupid, oh well, it wasn't as though they had to say them all the time.

Harry swallowed, and lifted his eyes slowly to lock with Draco's.

Draco delighted in the surrender he saw there, in the acceptance of this bond for at least one day, and his own delight flooded back to him from Harry, accomplished and embraced and made manifold.

Harry knew he was supposed to be paying attention to History of Magic, but even he grew rather weary of all the recitations of goblin rebellions—other things had happened in wizarding history, too, and if Binns would address them, perhaps Harry wouldn't have had to in his evening lessons—and besides, this morning there was all the distraction of Draco's mind before him, rich and shining.

He caught a hint of birthday, fifteenth birthday! And that slid him, naturally, into a memory of Draco's sixth birthday, the one he always treasured as the day that meant the most for itself. He'd gone riding on a broom early in the morning, the first time he'd been trusted off the ground without a guardian—even if his father did hover below him and watch him soaring and looping, ready to fly to the rescue if he got in trouble. It was still an important sign of independence. The memory of the taste of the wind was in his mouth even nine years later. It became more real, for Harry, than the taste of sleepiness in his own mouth, or the murmur of drowsy students around him.

Then his mother had brought him into the house and given him a cake she'd baked with her own hands, instead of having the house elves do it. That was how Harry learned that Narcissa Malfoy, undoubtedly skilled in Dark magic and in politics, was not at all skilled in cookery. The cake was lopsided and half-burnt and fell sloppily all over the table, but Draco didn't care. He ate it all, and kissed his mother on the cheek with a mouth made pale by the excessive

amount of sugar Narcissa had ended up putting in the cake, reasoning that more sweetness was always better.

Then Draco's father had taken charge of him again, and led him to an inner room in the Manor. There was the skeleton of the dragon that one of their distant ancestors had killed long ago, winning glory and a hefty portion of gold from grateful wizards. Lucius pointed out all the teeth and all the spines to his son, and told him stories of Malfoys in the past who had briefly claimed each part of the skeleton, ventured into the outer world with it, and made their fortune. Draco listened attentively to all the stories, eyes wide. Harry did, too. He supposed it was possible that these weren't the exact tales Lucius had told—Draco had replayed this memory so many times down the years that he'd altered little details of it to suit what he wanted it to be—but they were certainly more fascinating than yet another goblin rebellion.

Narcissa led Draco outside at sunset, and cast a spell that let him see, for just a moment, a beam of green light shooting up from the sun. It rose and shone at sunset, for two seconds only, and then vanished. Most people would miss it all the time, but the spell showed Draco exactly where to look, and made the beam glimmer in his eyes like fire. Draco squealed, and Narcissa hugged him and whispered that the beam must have been shining when he was born, because he'd been born at the exact moment of sunset. She kissed him on the forehead, and put him on the ground to run back inside.

He sat by the fire with his parents that night, and carefully opened his gifts: books, and a new Slytherin shirt that did not at all look like baby clothes, and a pair of silver serpents that would crawl around if he spoke one word and defend him if he spoke another, and a Kneazle kitten who proceeded to be the most spoiled cat in the world for the next year and a half, until he wandered away outside the wards and didn't come back.

Harry lingered in that last scene for a while, watching the fire and the calm expressions on the faces of Draco's parents. An emotion he managed to acknowledge was envy rose up in him. It felt wonderful just to be there. He didn't know what it would be like, to have a memory like this to fall back on every time one doubted a parent's love.

He opened his eyes, and blinked, and shook his head, and found Draco looking at him with an expression somewhere between sadness and awe.

“So that’s why you love your brother so much,” he whispered aloud, and touched the cord of the bond again.

Harry gasped aloud this time, since it felt like the purring Kneazle from Draco’s memory had just wound around his lungs and smothered them in sweet warmth. When he’d recovered, he said, “What did you see?”

“Enough,” said Draco, and the memories rushed through Harry’s mind, all of Connor, all filled with the bright shades of the affection he’d conceived for his brother in the years they spent in Godric’s Hollow.

Harry bowed his head, acknowledging the statement, and then the class ended and they stood to make their way to lunch. Arithmancy was more torturous than Draco had thought it would be. He’d anticipated vanishing almost completely into Harry’s memories, the way he had that morning, and known there would be trouble with Professor Vector over it. She was far more attentive than Binns, for one thing, and would want to know why in the world they weren’t doing their calculations.

Instead, the bond began alternating his viewpoint. Sometimes he saw things through his eyes, sometimes from Harry’s. It was a startling thing to find out just how fuzzy near-sightedness and glasses could make him. It was even odder to find out that Harry’s hands, although larger than his were, felt lighter. Draco supposed that was one reason he was able to catch the Snitch so easily.

Harry shifted around in his head, distressed, from his mind, and intrigued, and worried that someone would notice something was odd with them. Draco concealed a smile as he bowed his head over his problems, which abruptly became Harry’s (with the wrong answer to one of them, he noticed, no doubt caused by his distraction). His

empathy was usually a clear illustration of Harry's emotions after spending seven months with it, but this was like having both music and words, to know for certain what he was feeling and why, and not just have to guess from the sensations that blew against his skin or flashed in front of his face.

Calm down, he whispered, into Harry's head, taking the opportunity to view a few more memories. They were of the Shrieking Shack, and the confrontation with Sirius Black last year. Draco was just as glad that Harry didn't know he was reliving them. Draco was determined to know just what it was like to have been there, so that Harry's brother couldn't have that part of Harry all to himself any longer. He repressed horror with amusement at how badly Harry was taking this. No one else has noticed, not even Pansy when she walked right through the bond. I don't think it really exists for anyone but us.

But our behavior...

Hush. It's all right.

Draco watched some more of those memories, alternating them with glimpses of his own problems when Professor Vector walked past and peered sternly at him, and of Harry's when the bond insisted on putting those in front of him. He was happier and more content than he had been in a long time, though he ached with Harry's remembered pain. He knew Harry was hiding something else, some secret that so far he'd been adept at moving out of the way, but he also knew that Harry was almost wholly consumed with him. It was a nice thing to know that.

Which memories are you looking at—Draco!

Draco raised an eyebrow. You told me about it already.

Yes, but—

There is nothing that can make me turn away from you in disgust, Harry. Draco thought it was time for another honest, outright statement like that. Nothing at all. You don't have to worry about hiding from me.

He felt Harry wavering. It wasn't that he didn't believe Draco, more that he didn't think he could afford the self-indulgence of such a belief, or the self-indulgence it might lead him into.

I love you, Draco said, softly.

Slowly, tentatively, while they went on working Arithmancy problems and Draco watched memories, Harry was working himself towards a trust so absolute that it surpassed anything he'd arrived at so far. Draco couldn't remember a more pleasant afternoon.

Harry knew the exact moment when Draco found his plan to free the northern goblins. They were eating dinner—well, they were supposedly eating dinner, while Harry got distracted by thoughts he hadn't known Draco had and Draco talked at, more than with, Regulus—when the reminder darted innocently through Harry's head.

Draco gasped, and his hand clenched down on Harry's wrist to the point of pain. Harry jumped. Pansy turned around and frowned at both of them. "What's wrong with you?" she demanded. "You've been acting off all day, Draco."

"Nothing," said Draco. "I just remembered that I forgot to write that Charms essay." He rose to his feet, and for a moment Harry hoped he would let this go, but then his hand tugged insistently on Harry's wrist, and Harry reluctantly stood up with him. "Harry's going to help me with it."

Pansy snorted and poured herself more pumpkin juice. "Whatever you say, Draco. Harry's going to help you half-write it, you mean."

"No, really," said Draco, his teeth shining in what would have seemed like a smile to anyone who didn't know him well as he drew Harry out of the Great Hall. "I just want to talk with Harry."

That word came out as a snap, and Harry ducked his head. He couldn't look up at Draco as they went towards the dungeons together. Of course, with the bond and thus Draco in his head, it didn't matter. He could feel rage and disappointment all the way down,

and only part of it was rage and disappointment at himself for not being able to keep that plan hidden. He'd done his best by not thinking of it deliberately, and Draco had seemed so fascinated by everything else in his head that Harry had thought this day might pass and they'd be done with it.

And now he was feeling those stupid contradictory emotions again, anger that Draco had found it out—and relief that he had.

Draco didn't bother going back to the common room, maybe because they both knew it would be filled with other students. Instead, he drew Harry into a small side tunnel in the dungeons, and held his wrist with one hand and his chin with the other. Harry concentrated on ignoring the doubled physical sensations, and held Draco's eyes, and waited.

"Tell me about why you think you need to do this," said Draco.

Well, that's a better beginning than I could have hoped for.

Don't worry, Harry. Harry winced as Draco stepped fully into his head through the bond. I can do it this way if you want. In fact, I think it will. It makes it impossible for you to lie to me.

Instead of responding in words, Harry shared the image what he'd learned about the northern goblins' web from the southern goblins and Helcas, both of whom were happy to answer his question. The web couldn't be torn without destroying the linchpins, the ancient family homes, mostly of Light pureblood families, that held it together. Nor could it be transferred to something else as easily as Harry had shifted the southern web to an imitation of Gringotts. Instead, something would have to take the linchpins' place, moving into the embrace of the web itself, holding the net down like stakes and allowing the goblins to slip free in the moment of replacement.

Harry could think of only one thing that would be strong enough and large enough to take the linchpins' place: torn bits of magic, set free forever from the wizard that had held them, and freely given up without grudging or resentment, which would add to the power of the sacrifice. He was the only wizard with Lord-level power who might make a willing sacrifice of his magic like that.

It could kill you, said Draco. It would certainly deprive you of magic, and the ability to help other magical creatures get free. You know that, don't you?

He knows that, said Regulus. I told him that. But he isn't listening to me. He thinks he has to do it right now, and he won't wait to find some better solution.

Why not?

The answer flooded up and out of Harry before he could stop it, called from him by the deep stare of Draco's eyes.

He could not rest. He could not relax. He distrusted everything he was doing, unless he was sure that he was doing it to help someone else. The success he'd had lately with the webs meant that he wanted to keep up the same pace, freeing the other species as rapidly as he'd managed in the last few months. He had to do that, or he would start feeling contemptible, as if he were wasting his life.

Draco let out a sharp breath. "No wonder it was hard for you to agree to this bond," he whispered aloud. "You knew that you were doing it for yourself as well as for me, and you knew that you'd spend a full day not thinking about being vates."

Harry nodded. Perhaps Draco would drop his anger now—

"I will not," said Draco. "What you're thinking of doing is stupid, Harry, and it's all right to be a little selfish. The goblins encouraged this, didn't they?"

"I proposed it to them," Harry murmured.

"And they probably thought you would stop yourself if you were making an irreparable sacrifice," said Draco. "They don't know anything about how much it would cost you, do they? Because you keep hiding how much it would cost you. Merlin, Harry, that has to stop. I said it would, once, last year, when I made you start sleeping more. And this is going to stop, too."

Harry twisted, trying to withdraw, not wanting to, but absolutely sure that he had to. How could he ask this much from Draco? And how could he stay this close, let someone know him this well, delay doing something to help someone else when it was in his power—

Draco surged forward along the bond, and showed him how.

Sight dropped away entirely, this time. There was only the bond between them, pulsing with mingled gold and green, and that deep trust that had permitted the link to form in the first place, both times.

If we make a mistake, Harry, it's not forever. We're stronger than to be shattered by one accusation of selfishness or one argument. Guilt passes over us and goes away just as much as happiness like this does. We're part of the future, not only the present, and not only the past.

Harry felt dizzying waves of gold and green crash around him, and for a moment, it was as if he were back in the Maze, and seeing the truths written there in letters too bright for him to deny.

Thinking of Draco and himself was—thinking of Draco and himself. It didn't mean that he was taking time and attention away from other people who deserved it more. He didn't have to keep a constant guard on his thoughts to avoid slipping into evil. There was good to be found outside self-denial.

Why does selflessness equal goodness?

I—I don't know.

Draco promptly pounced on the illogic and swatted it away, just as he had other pieces in the past. It was all right to be a little selfish, he repeated firmly, and poured light and warmth and happiness down the bond until Harry was shaking in pleasure, gasping and sure that he was only going to want more of this.

He opened his eyes, slowly, when the tide receded a bit, and found Draco standing in front of him, arms around his waist and smile smug.

“Convinced, now?” Draco asked.

Harry nodded. Already he was finding it hard to remember why he’d wanted so much to sacrifice his magic, perhaps his life, to freeing the northern goblins. He could find some other, better way. He could wait. And the goblins could live with their disappointment if he had to send them a letter telling them so, and so could he.

That’s why you should always bring problems like that to me, Draco said, more smug than ever. I can point out the obvious.

Harry moved forward and quietly embraced him. The bond was not so bad after all.

He still could not live like this, with his mind sliding so completely into Draco’s, and he would end the bond at midnight, as they’d planned. But he would not be so terrified again, and he could feel possibilities expanding ahead of him, as if he were a dragon new-hatched from the egg and drying its wings in preparation for flight. He would find cold wind currents and falls aplenty, he knew that, but that didn’t diminish the value of the warm skies, and the happiness and hope of the first leap into the air.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Happy birthday. I love you.”

Draco held him tighter, and said not a word, though his smugness had expanded to batter at the inside of Harry’s skull.

I rather like Draco self-satisfied, Harry thought, as they walked back to the dungeons together.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: First Guardian and Last Line of Defense

Snape sat down slowly. He had become very good at putting off this moment, this necessary but horrible part of his day. He would mark essays, cast cleaning spells on his quarters—unnecessary, as he continued to permit house elves into them—number his potions ingredients, brew complicated experimental mixtures that usually came to nothing, read books on history from the Hogwarts library. He would count the minutes remaining until another class began or he could go to the Great Hall and eat. His free hours, once a precious, jealousy guarded time that always ran away from him, now dragged.

Until he approached the desk, of course, and pulled out the glass bottle filled with flowing, silvery liquid and the parchment and quill he was using to write down the memories he had seen.

He had not realized, when he created the Pensieve Potion, how well it would work. Not only were the memories as sharp and clear as they were in an ordinary Pensieve, but they responded to the touch of Snape's mind. If he cast his thoughts into the liquid while concentrating on something Harry had done in Potions class, they would fetch the memory in which Harry had most probably learned that behavior, or one like it. If he thought about Draco Malfoy, the Headmaster might appear reading a letter from Lily in which she mentioned Draco. He could also tell in an instant whether he had seen one of the memories before, and slide into another.

It was useful in that it let him create a record of the Headmaster's memories of Harry's childhood, without repeating incident after incident.

It was terrible in that it drove him closer and closer to the edge of rage, and he could not tell anyone of it. McGonagall or Narcissa Malfoy might have been willing to help, but Harry would never forgive him for betraying his trust like that. Dumbledore was obviously not an option. Draco, who would have understood best, had refused to give Snape his own memories.

Alone, Snape sometimes wondered if he should stop recording the memories. The scrolls and scrolls he had so far would have been

more than enough evidence for any plan of revenge he cared to enact. And it would release him from the dread of sitting down to do it again each night.

But still a compulsion, strong as any magical one that Dumbledore or Voldemort might have fashioned, drew him on, made him take up the quill, and lower his face, and open the bottle, and enter into a world he had never known existed quietly beside him during the ten years he'd taught at Hogwarts before Harry came there, lying like a coiled basilisk in Dumbledore's head.

Lily Potter came striding across the lawn of Godric's Hollow, her eyes anxious and her hand already held out to clasp Dumbledore's. The older wizard took her wrist and peered keenly into her eyes. The memory did not show Snape whatever he saw, since he was standing on the grass and observing them both from the outside, but he saw Dumbledore's face grow weary.

"I thought you might have exaggerated in your letter, my dear," he said, gently patting her hand. "I came here intending to soothe your fears. I see that I was wrong. Of course you would know your own son best."

Lily nodded. "I wouldn't have contacted you if it were just the once, Albus," she whispered, turning and looking at the house. Snape followed her gaze. He had learned to hate the sight of that place, Harry's prison, even though right now it was doing nothing but slumber quietly in the sun. "Or even just for a week. But it's been two weeks now, and he's still doing it."

"I understand, my dear," the Headmaster said. "Can you describe again, for me, exactly what happens when young Harry gets angry?"

Lily shivered. "The air around him boils," she said. "I can feel the web bucking, as if his magic's trying to force its way out. And, of course, I smell dog vomit. I always do, when he's exercising his strength."

"That is a concern," Dumbledore murmured, his brow wrinkled. "The web should hold at all costs. And you are certain that it happens only when he gets angry, and at no other time?"

Lily nodded.

“Why has he had so much occasion to get angry in the past two weeks?” Dumbledore asked, and Lily immediately turned her head and stared intently at a spot on the ground. Snape did the same thing, not because he expected to see any explanation for her fixed gaze, but because it kept him from trying to draw his wand and curse either one of them, which always interrupted the memory.

“Lily?” Dumbledore prompted, after a few minutes’ silence.

“I was trying to teach him that, even in front of people whom he trusts, he needs to keep his guard up at all times,” Lily replied in soft tones. “I was making little threatening motions towards Connor—oh, not anything that other people would interpret as a threat, but gestures as if I were going to draw my wand, gestures linked to specific hexes. Harry, though, has to hold still and not respond, because I was doing it in front of James and Sirius, and he’s been told not to show what he is to them. Afterwards, he’s always very angry. The instincts I placed in him are being thwarted, I know. But I thought he had better control than this, or I would never have tried it.” Lily crossed her arms and shivered. “He is foul, Headmaster. I smell that all the time. I don’t want to have that magic turned on me.”

Snape wanted to scream. No, wait, he thought, as his anger acquired a cold and dangerous edge that he hadn’t felt in years. He wanted to make them scream. He had once seen Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange, trading off in smooth coordinated movements, keep a Muggleborn witch alive for seventeen days. He would better their record, if he could have had his way with Lily Potter.

“I don’t think anyone would,” said Dumbledore. “And you are bearing a burden greater than anything he has, Lily. Living alone with your sons, raising one to be a hero and trying to train the other out of being a Dark Lord, deprived of the support of your husband and your friends...I know no one who would envy you.”

Lily slowly raised her head, her green eyes acquiring a tinge of determination and stubbornness that Snape had seen far more often

on her son's face. "Thank you, Headmaster. What should I do about Harry's anger, though?"

"Let me talk to him."

They went into the house, and found Connor asleep, taking a nap on one of two beds in a bedroom that Snape had also learned to hate and detest. Harry was sitting on the other, crouched above a book. He looked up when the two adults—not including Snape, whom he couldn't see—entered the room. His face was blank, emotionless, until he caught sight of Lily. Then Snape saw a wind make the pages of his book tremble. He went on staring at Lily, and his eyes held very nearly the same feral gaze that Snape had seen on Christmas night.

"Harry. Harry, look at me."

Carefully, Harry looked away from Lily and at the Headmaster. Dumbledore shook his head, and spoke in a chiding tone.

"Harry, you are old enough to know that getting angry with your mother will do no good. Why should it? She's the one who has to raise both you and Connor, and she's the only one who can tell you everything that you need to know. And she loves you. Don't let the anger get the better of you."

Harry cocked his head to the side, in silent question as to what he should do instead. Snape thought he was about six in this memory. They had already turned Harry into someone who went quiet and watched the world. Snape wondered whether that mask would have shattered so easily if not for the near-complete destruction of Harry's mind at the end of his second year.

"Learn to put your anger away," Dumbledore told him quietly. "Imagine a box into which you put your rage. Your mother told me that you have one for bad thoughts about your brother. Can you put your rage into that box?"

Harry lowered his head and closed his eyes. The wind died in the next moment, and the pages of the book fell flat again. Then Harry murmured, still without opening his eyes, "It worked."

"Of course it did," said Dumbledore, and touched his arm, and smiled at Lily over his head. "You're growing into a proper wizard, Harry. Getting angry at people isn't productive, and you've learned that."

Snape watched the boy the day after he saw that memory, and noticed that Harry simply slid aside, calmly, from most confrontations that might have provoked irritation in another boy that age. He did get angry with himself fairly often, but even that was soothed when Draco complained about the sensations it caused. His rage no longer went into a box, but Harry did send it away.

It was no wonder, Snape thought, that Harry lost control in situations where he was angry but had no immediate goal to take up the magic that that emotion raised. He could fight for others' lives, he could attempt to subdue Voldemort if he faced him, he could use the strength of his own convictions to cow Dumbledore into backing down, but outside that—

His fury simply went wild.

Snape was sorry, now, that he had taught Harry to resist the De Profundis curse, and shut those emotions in a cage, another version of the box. Harry had put them there by his own choice, but that didn't matter. He still had no idea how to handle them.

And if the cage was ever broken...

Snape shuddered to think.

That emotion pounded his hatred into iron-hard determination to take revenge, someday, when Harry should have seen the light and understood that his parents and Dumbledore would have to suffer for what they had done. But Snape was still a young wizard, having lived only thirty-five years compared to the lifespan of more than a hundred that he might see. He could wait. He would wait. He would take revenge the moment Harry gave him permission, and not before.

This was a memory that Harry would not have known included Dumbledore's presence, because Lily had sent him a proud letter informing him of Harry's progress, but not told Harry that he was

coming. The Headmaster stood under a Disillusionment Charm near the corner of the house, and watched Lily come out of the door and move towards Harry, who stood on the lawn studying the stars. His mother had told him to be here at this hour, just after dinner, and not to bring a book, but he was never one to waste any time when he might get some studying done.

Lily crouched down behind Harry and called his name. Harry turned to face her. He was eight, Snape thought, his face pale and utterly calm. If his magic had escaped his control any time in the last two years, it was not evident. He still had an aura of power, but judging from the tender smile his mother cast at him, it was not one that disgusted her.

"It's been two months, Harry," said Lily. "You've passed this test."

Harry blinked a few times. Then he shuffled a foot as if he would walk towards his mother, but in the end kept still. Lily nodded at him.

"It's all right," she said, and held out one hand, at the height, Snape thought, in his storm of fury and contempt, that she would use to pet a dog.

Harry walked over to her and took her wrist in a firm grasp. Snape could see a fine shiver run over his frame. He bowed his head and stood still for a moment, while Lily stroked his hair.

Snape glanced at Dumbledore's face. The Headmaster was smiling, pleased, just like Lily was, that Harry had got through this particular test.

Lily had not touched Harry for two months, and had also charged him to resist anyone else's attempt to touch him, in such a way that neither Connor nor James nor Lupin or Black would realize that Harry was shrugging off their embraces, ducking away from friendly punches or rufflings of his hair, managing just not to be there when they reached towards him. He'd done it expertly. Perhaps Sirius had thought something was strange a time or two, Lily had said in her exultant letter to Dumbledore, but he'd dropped all suspicions after a

few days when yet another of his numerous love affairs preoccupied his attention.

They were training Harry to stand by himself, and not show others that he was doing it. Both parts of the lesson were equally important. Snape had come nearest to shattering the bottle of Pensieve Potion that night. He had thought Harry's inability to casually brush against other people was a consequence of his other training, not something that Lily had specifically drilled into him. And now, to learn it was not...

Lily and Dumbledore had had the justification that Harry couldn't let himself be distracted by other people, not when he needed to focus on his brother. Besides, a casual touch from a Death Eater could disguise the wand that would press against his side or the knife that would slip between his ribs. He had to avoid most contact out of simple common sense.

Snape did not care about their justifications. He did not care about the twisted, poisoned little world in which Harry had been raised beyond the isolation wards at Godric's Hollow. He needed to understand it, so that he might help heal Harry when the moment came, but he would never admit that what had happened there had been in any way excusable, in any way rational.

He raged, and he stared at the wall when it was done, and he let the fires die within him.

He still needed to wait for Harry's permission before he did anything, or, failing that, some sign that Harry was being abused again and would not rescue himself.

But sometimes it was hard, and he did not think he could be blamed a bloody fantasy or two of the Headmaster dying throughout the day. This memory was one that Lily had sent Dumbledore in a Pensieve of her own, and which had therefore become part of his mind concerning Harry's training even though he'd never witnessed it in person. Harry was seven. He sat beside the window of his bedroom on a summer evening, his eyes closed and his hands clasped in front of him. Lily sat across from him on his brother's bed, reading. Snape

could hear a child's eager shouts from beyond the window. Probably Connor Potter was outside playing; he seemed to spend a great deal more time immersed in games and pranks than Harry did.

Harry had timed even his breathing to be quiet, and so the loudest sound in the room was Lily's voice.

"...held near Ottery St. Catchpole. The names of the Death Eaters who began it are unknown, but almost certainly they did so at You-Know-Who's suggestion. The Dark Lord did not take kindly to his servants claiming initiative that he himself would not have given them."

Lily paused to turn a page. A bird's piercing whirr came through the window. Harry nodded his head a little, as though he were falling asleep, though Snape doubted that; he would be memorizing everything he had heard, more than likely. Meanwhile, he himself stood in stupefied silence that a mother was reading this to her child. He knew what had happened at Ottery St. Catchpole when the Death Eaters still ran free. Everyone did. Harry could have waited until he was fourteen to know the details, and his life would not have been marred.

"The Death Eaters took dozens of Muggleborn children from their homes, and, most unusually, did not kill their families. It was believed they did this as part of their strategy, to encourage desperate hope and anticipation, and even to encourage their families to withdraw from the war. Of course, when the news of the Children's Massacre came a few days later, all thoughts of strategy vanished in a tide of overwhelming grief.

"The Death Eaters raised crosses from the ground near Ottery St. Catchpole, and crucified the Muggleborn children upon them. They used spells that heightened the pain of the nails being driven through their wrists and ankles, and other spells to make sure that they stayed alive throughout it and did not die from the shock. Finally, they set a ward around the crosses in one of the rare examples of Dark wizards cooperating during You-Know-Who's War. The ward took hours to knock down when the Light wizards and the Aurors finally

reached it. When it finally fell, lines of lightning lashed from it and struck every child dead before they could be rescued. The emotional destruction of many families was complete, and far fewer Muggleborns remained in the war; instead, they applied for sanctuary from the Aurors and Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, and retreated into hiding.”

Lily paused in her reading. Harry still sat before her with his eyes closed, but he blinked them open when she softly called his name. Snape’s stomach was clenching, with revulsion and with memory. He hadn’t participated in the Massacre—that had been Evan Rosier’s brainchild—but he had seen the aftereffects of it. That was enough. It was one of the foulest, bitterest memories of Voldemort’s War.

It was nothing a child Harry’s age should have heard.

“What have you learned, Harry?” Lily whispered.

“That this is war,” Harry said, in the same calm, neutral tone that Snape had heard many times during his first year. “That I can only trust former Death Eaters if they come to me on formal terms of alliance. That our enemies will stop at nothing to take down the Light.” He paused a moment. “And since Connor’s the heart and center of the Light, they’ll stop at nothing to take him down.”

“That’s right,” said Lily earnestly, and laid the book aside to lean over her son and clasp his cheeks in her hands. “That is why you have to be so carefully prepared all the time, Harry. You’re the first guardian and the last line of defense. Most people won’t think you’re dangerous, since you’re Connor’s brother and just the same age as he is. And if you can keep up your façade, then they’ll never know. But you can be right there, and you can shield him from Death Eater attacks.”

Harry nodded. “When do you think Voldemort will come back, Mum?” he asked her, looking supremely contented as Lily kissed him on the forehead. If this was the most contact he had with his mother, Snape supposed, this might well be one of his happiest memories.

I am going to make myself sick if I keep on thinking like that, he realized, and twisted his thoughts as firmly as he could back onto the familiar track. Hating Lily Potter was far more refreshing than dwelling on all the piled scars Harry had accumulated.

"He might return at any time," said Lily softly, seriously. "He might wait years, or he might strike before you and Connor enter Hogwarts." She paused a moment, and turned her head from side to side. "Speaking of that, do you know where your brother is right now?"

Harry's eyes widened, and he leaped to his feet. A laugh came through the window, though, and made him spin around in relief. "There," he said. "He's outside, with Dad."

"You should go and check," said Lily. "Always check on him first, Harry, and you'll be doing your duty. You don't know what condition he's in, wounded or fine. Or he might be dead, and one of the Death Eaters might be imitating his voice with a spell, and then you'll have failed."

Panic flashed in Harry's eyes, and he charged out the door. Lily remained sitting where she was, head bowed and an expression on her face that made her old before her time. A litany of spells ran through Snape's head, all of which would kill her, and he saw at least five places in the room to hide the body so that her disappearance would not lead to immediate conclusions of murder.

He controlled himself with an effort. This was a memory, only a memory, and what she had done to Harry was already done.

Harry came back into the room a few minutes later, looking relieved. "Thank you, Mum," he said. "He was all right, but you're right. I should never take it for granted. I should always check."

He kissed her on the cheek, a gesture that Lily only tilted her head to passively accept, and then whispered, "I love you, Mum," and ran back out of the room to watch his brother some more.

Lily bowed her head into her hands and wept.

Snape recorded that memory with a steady hand, unlike many of the others, where his fury made his quill shake and blot the parchment. He had gone out beyond anger into some place on the other side of it, and when he was done, he pushed his chair back from the table and left the school by a secret way he knew, walking on the grounds near the edge of the Forbidden Forest and looking up at the stars.

It was May now, season of life, season of spring. Snape had danced at Walpurgis Night two weeks ago. He could feel his own power rearing up in him at all hours now. It had never gone completely to sleep since the wild Dark magic summoned it. It remained patiently within call, and it eagerly took to any task that he might be able to find for it.

Snape stopped at the very edge of the Forest and breathed. The scents of thick, growing grass and turned earth filled his nostrils. Hagrid was making a garden of some kind, probably for the insanely dangerous creatures he would acquire for his Care of Magical Creatures class over the summer. Snape could hear the wind brushing through the leaves, restless and always in motion. It came close enough to him to stir his hair, though it did not ruffle his robes. There were certain sins even the wind knew better than to commit.

Snape looked up at the stars some more, and thought he could hear a twitch, a tingle, of frenzied music on the edge of hearing. He'd heard it a few times as a child, before his mother had given him a wand and taught him sternly to use that instead of giving in to his own accidental magic. It called to him now, and promised surrender, and wonder in the surrender. Riding that magic, he could do anything, be anything.

Snape knew it was a lie, of course. He would lose himself in that wildness, lose his self-control and his prepossession and all the other cold virtues he had spent a lifetime constructing. He had seen that much on Walpurgis. Any wizard attempting to master that sheer rush of power would die. It was not meant to be mastered.

Besides, he wanted to use his own magic to punish the Potters and Dumbledore, if it was allowed, or at least his own means of revenge,

the Pensieve Potion and the scrolls he'd been carefully compiling and the knowledge of minutiae in the raising of a pureblood child that he'd painstakingly assembled from the books he read.

But he did wish, for just a moment, that the wild Dark had swooped down on Godric's Hollow years ago, shattered the isolation wards, and borne Harry away, even if it meant that Snape would never have known him.

This was another occasion when Dumbledore had come to Godric's Hollow to witness the culmination of a test that Harry had carefully gone through for months. Like the one with not touching anyone, it was a conscious test. Snape knew the perimeters already, and stood behind Dumbledore in his Disillusionment Charm, faint and sick and attempting to deal with his own faintness and sickness before Harry appeared, so that he could remember everything properly.

Harry and Lily at last stepped out of the house. It was another nighttime scene, but rainy this time, sullen drops dripping from the clouds and plopping on Harry's cheeks. The boy didn't appear to notice. Of course, by this time, when he was almost ten years old, Snape knew, he had been through pain curses more debilitating than any rain, and had trained himself to ignore sensations like cold, wetness, and heat, long past the point when another child would have been whining. He had to keep going, as Dumbledore and Lily thought of it. He had to learn to be a soldier, and a soldier might have to fight in any and all sorts of conditions.

Lily faced him now, and waited. Harry copied her stance, his head tilted up towards her, and his hands loosely folded in front of his body, seemingly awaiting a direction or a command.

"Good," said Lily, and then cast a charm that Snape recognized as one that mediwizards used to ease patients who had suffered from the cold touch of a malicious, powerful ghost. It would warm the person, and usually the blankets around him, up, and make him fall asleep more easily.

Harry at once wriggled his shoulders uncomfortably, and then murmured, "Finite Incantatem," throwing it off with a wave of his practice wand.

Lily smiled, the smile that Harry lived for and drank in as if it were ambrosia, and then proceeded through a series of other charms and incantations. Some of them gave Harry a pleasant taste, as if his mouth were filled with chocolate. Some mimicked the effect of Calming Draughts. Others were used to create entertaining illusions, or to fill a wizard's ears with sweet music, or to cause dazzling lights and shadows that Snape remembered running after in mad bursts when he was a child, some of the few moments of happiness he'd ever had.

Harry dismissed each of them with various signs of discomfort, none of them, so far as Snape could tell, feigned. Then he met his mother's eyes and waited for the final verdict that she would give him.

Lily walked forward and knelt in front of her son without trying to touch him. Harry lifted his head. Snape could see the pulse beating faster in his throat, but that was the only sign that he was at all agitated or worried about what his mother might say.

"You did it," Lily whispered. "You pass, Harry. The last two years are the best you have ever spent."

Harry bowed his head, making no sign of relief; the very small sigh he let out might have been mistaken for weariness or even disappointment. Lily stroked his hair, once, then stood and walked back inside the house.

Harry turned and walked thoughtfully away, sitting down at a distance from it. The position he took was one that Snape knew sentries practiced, to remain unmoving as long as possible. He gazed into the distance, and Merlin alone knew what he was thinking about. His eyes shone, but his face gave no clue.

The memory ended there, since Dumbledore was well-satisfied that he and Lily had accomplished their purpose, and he had no reason to stay longer.

Snape found himself back in his own office, the Pensieve Potion floating dangerously off to the side. His wandless magic had arisen and flared out around him, and was prepared to drop the bottle if he

wanted it to. It would shatter all over the floor, and there would go the memories that tortured him so, the memories that weren't even his and which he could tell no one he had seen.

Snape sat down, though he let his magic hover the bottle over the floor to wear itself out, and calmly wrote his conclusions into place. They started with an exact account of the memory first, much aided by the year he'd spent as a spy, training his mind into recalling many details that no one else would have even noticed; on such small things did survival in the Dark Lord's service depend. Then Snape added a note at the end, in the place where he always put what that particular test or piece of abuse had been meant to accomplish with Harry.

They trained him to be afraid of things that feel good.

Snape did snap the quill after that, and allowed his magic to set it on fire, because there was nothing else that he could have done to ease the crowding pressure. That made the bottle of the Pensieve Potion start to fall, though, and he had to put out a hand hastily to catch it before it hit the floor.

Snape sat at the head table on the morning of the twentieth of June, the day before the Third Task, and watched Harry sitting with Draco as if he hadn't a care, moving one hand in a gesture that made Draco pretend to cower and then burst out laughing. Harry joined him. It was a wonder that he could laugh, nearly a miracle, and it added the final hammer blow to the iron will Snape had been forging for himself throughout the last few months.

In silence he'd borne it, though he knew Harry had suspected something was wrong from the flashes of temper he'd displayed these last months. He'd been angry again and again that he couldn't simply go out and take revenge on the Potters and Dumbledore, but he'd promised. The iron will was as much to restrain himself as it was to bind him to his most crucial task.

It all only confirmed that vow he had made months ago, before he began thoroughly investigating the memories in the Pensieve Potion.

So long as he could best help by making sure that Harry was protected, then he would do that. Harry needed to trust him, and his trust would be broken if Snape even spoke to him about punishing the people who had abused him.

If the moment ever came when Harry was in danger from Lily and James and Dumbledore again, and could not protect himself, then Snape would move.

To hell with whether he hates me after that, he thought, each word a distinct, ringing strike on the surface of his mind. He has come through too much, survived too much. I will not let them take that away and reverse his progress, even if Harry wants me to.

Better he hate me and be able to laugh like that than to love me and be silent.

Intermission: Five Months

February

It was disrespectful, of course. The boy had faced him in front of everyone and dreamed, for at least a moment, of revealing everything that he had been trained to keep secret. Albus was most astonished and dismayed at that, that Harry could think of betraying them, after all of this, after—everything.

Dismayed, and perhaps a bit frightened, if he were honest with himself. The web was gone, of course it was, and Harry was someone Albus would have to negotiate with, of course he was. But Harry's tendency to silence had saved his mother and Albus's reputation after Christmas. Albus had assumed, perhaps foolishly, that that silence would still hold. To see even the consideration of telling all the truth flash through Harry's eyes, for the scant moment that it had...

Albus needed to write a letter. His first one, summoning James to Hogwarts and telling him that his sons would like to see him there for the Second Task, had failed. James had come, but he'd let Harry pressure him into cringing compliance with his wishes. Albus needed someone who would see the danger Harry presented and have the strength to help.

There was only one person he could think of who might believe the one thing and possess the other, and he was someone Albus had not spoken to in so long that he had given up thought of ever writing to him again.

But this was an emergency. The boy was something worse than an incipient Dark Lord; he was someone who might undo all Albus's careful work by accusing him of child abuse and eating his magic. And then he would try to lead the wizarding world, a task no fourteen-year-old wizard could accomplish, and the last beautiful things in the world Albus had loved and fought for for so long would fall to wrack and ruin.

Albus sat down and wrote the letter. He did not try to conceal any of the truth. He confessed all his mistakes, and all the things that might make his old friend think badly of him, and then included a plea for help. He sealed the letter, and sent it off with a school owl, missing Fawkes sorely. Fawkes could have made the journey in seconds and returned to him with a reply as fast, always assuming that his old friend was in the mood to reply. Albus would have to wait for an answer.

And he feared that in this case, time was of the essence.

March

Albus laid the return letter gently on the table. It had taken his old friend weeks to respond, as Albus had thought it might. He would have had to think, and as old as he was, he no longer moved fast.

It was a good thing the letter had come today. Albus had seen the boy converse with snakes in the Great Hall, the Many, who were free from yet another shattered web. The boy was destroying the wizarding world as Albus watched. The Many could so easily have bitten any of the children in the Great Hall. Of course, Harry, with his misguided ideals, did not care about that, and it had not happened.

But it had nearly happened.

Unable to wait any longer, Albus tore open the letter and read what was printed there.

Old friend:

I am surprised that you have contacted me on a matter of this importance only now. I ought to have been by your side from the beginning, offering you advice and guiding you in your care of this young Lord.

I fear it may already be too late, as you warned me, but I will offer you two suggestions. One is to be subtle. Move as slowly as possible, for

all that you fear young Harry will accuse you any day now. If it were truly going to be “any day now,” I think he would have done it already. From what you told me of the way you raised him, his forgiving impulse runs deep. He will give you time, because you could still be of use to him in the war that is coming, and he can dismiss any crime against himself, as long as it is only against himself.

For the second suggestion, remember the discipline I once taught you. The bravest, boldest weapons are the ones that look best on a battlefield, but the careful ones are those that insure there need be no battlefield in the first place. You were too light-handed with Tom Riddle, and too heavy-handed with young Harry. Take the middle road now, and court the mist.

With all due affection,

Your old teacher.

Albus sighed and put the letter gently aside. The news was not quite as good as he'd hoped—if it were, his old friend would already be at his side—but he had received sensible advice. Now that he could step back and look at things rationally, he saw that someone else was far more likely than Harry to accuse him of wrongdoing. Harry had let matters go in their course for nearly a month.

Court the mist.

He always did have the best advice, Albus mused, and set about doing it, and being subtle for once in his life.

April

Tonight was a night to mourn old comrades.

Tonight was the night that he knew he had lost Minerva forever.

Albus sat meditatively in front of the hearth and looked at his glass of firewhisky. It shone when he turned it back and forth, and caught the

colors of the flames. Albus swallowed a sip of it, and remembered old battlefields, old battles, and the fallen, and those still alive.

Minerva McGonagall had come to Hogwarts a few years ahead of Tom Riddle, eyes bright and shining with the determination of the fiercest of the Light pureblood lines. Albus could remember the proverbs of his youth, and it was true, what they said: one wanted a Starrise for pretty words, a Gloryflower for cleverness, and a McGonagall for sheer bloody-minded stubbornness and refusal to give up.

She'd gone into Gryffindor. She'd belonged there. She'd had natural talent at Transfiguration. She deserved it. There was nothing hidden about her, nothing duplicitous, for all that her Animagus form was a cat, creature of shadows and secrets. She became one of the youngest Animagi ever, before the first echoes of Grindelwald's War were quite dead, and Albus had not been surprised. Minerva McGonagall had always distinguished herself. It was a combination of knowing where she belonged, admiration, and hope for her friendship that made him hire her for the Transfiguration position when that became open, and of course she had to be Head of Gryffindor; no one else would do.

She'd fought like her namesake on the battlefields in Voldemort's War: led charges, organized retreats, saved wounded comrades, and, in a rage, Transfigured more than one Death Eater into a fish far from water. She was the best kind of warrior, Albus thought. She was the kind who never forgot that what they fought for was ultimately peace, and she could gladly let the pomp and noise of war go and embrace that peace when it came around again.

She was the kind of person who would gaze on the tangled nests and knots of the wards that Albus had filled with his own power, so as to have certain areas of the school more firmly under his control, and raise accusing eyes to his, and make him feel, for a moment, small and cowering as a mouse under her paws.

"To absent friends," Albus said quietly. "To fallen ones. And to those whose paths have parted from mine."

He downed the rest of the firewhisky in one gulp, already putting the regrets away and moving to the unwilling position of considering Minerva his enemy.

May

Albus sat in his office, eyes closed, and, carefully, courted the mist.

Most compulsion was a straight-out, forceful blow. That was the way Tom often used it. Or one could wield it like a whip, flaying an order into another mind and then springing out again. Or it could be used unconsciously, as Connor Potter had before he discovered he had the gift, but that usually made the other people around the compeller suspect something.

There were far more subtle practices of it. Albus had usually put his own into his voice. He had felt bad, the first time he made a speech and seen other people fall into line with his own beliefs, but his old friend had taught him better than that. Many so-called Dark gifts were not that Dark, at bottom. Nor were they Light, precisely. What mattered were the motives of the user. Dark might seem all compulsion, at first, but then one became aware of the definitions of wildness, and deception, and solitude. And the world was always more complicated than people had realized.

Thus Albus spread his compulsion like a thin, gentle mist throughout the castle, drifting, mingling with the air, no more noticeable than a brief smell of food from the kitchens would be. People would turn their heads, find their desires inclined in the direction of one particular thought for a few moments, and then shake themselves and hurry on.

Most of the time. When the compulsion had penetrated far enough into the air, became one with it, then each student and staff member would breathe it in all the time. Their hurrying away would only carry them into the midst of it once more. Like the windy sensation of normal compulsion, it would twine with their thoughts, ride in undetectably, and sway them in the direction of Albus's opinion.

It was a risky thing, because it was not true compulsion; it only made people suggestible, not controlled them. That was why Tom had never used his compulsion this way that Albus knew of, for all that he was perfectly capable of it. It took too long, and it wasn't impressive enough for him. He preferred intimidating people with one messy and drastic raid to waiting years for a fragile ascendancy that he might never gain at all.

Albus, though, thought it his best course. He had the time, now that he no longer believed Harry would denounce him any moment. And the compulsion was so soft and thin as to go undetected by someone who wasn't a very watchful compeller himself. And it would not affect those minds strongly set against him—Harry, Severus, Minerva—for a very long time if ever. That made them unlikely to suspect what he was doing.

Albus might have disdained serving the wizarding world by subterfuge, once. But the last fourteen years had accustomed him to sacrifices of all kinds.

June

Albus shaded his eyes with one hand and watched the rising sun. He stood on the Astronomy Tower, and it was the day before the Third Task. Exams had ended a few days ago, but the students remained, eager to see the outcome of the Tournament.

So much else had happened in the past few months that Albus found it hard to believe that he'd once found the Tournament an overriding concern.

He heard a footstep behind him, and turned to see Sybill Trelawney approaching him. She shivered, though it wasn't cold this late in the season, and clutched her shawl around her.

"I'm here as you asked, Headmaster," she said, with the cringing half-defiance that she offered him alone of the staff, and which Albus thought was the truest reflection of her inner self.

He surveyed her kindly. He could afford to be kind to the victims of the world, and Sybill Trelawney was most assuredly among them. He'd thought so ever since he hired her after her first successful prophecy, and he felt even sorrier for her now. It could not be pleasant to have one's gift of Seeing change on one so suddenly.

"The prophecy again, if you please, Sybill," he said, quietly.

The Seer sighed and stared off into the direction of the sunrise, not blinking, though the light must have been stinging her eyes. She had made a prophecy the other day that she was actually able to remember, and she recited it now, her voice going flat and monotonous.

"Three on three the old one coils,

Three in its times, three in its choices,

It bears his rivals to silence and stillness,

And the wild Darkness laughs, and the Light rejoices.

"Two on two the storms that are coming,

Two for the day, and two for the year,

The storm of darkness when no moon will shine,

And the storm of light that will blaze most fiercely here.

"One on one all the prophecies bear down,

One is their center, and one is their heart,

And from my mouth comes no Divination again

Except those prophecies in which he has a part."

Trelawney finished with a pensive sigh. Albus stood in silence for a moment, his head half-bowed.

“Tell me, Sybill,” he said at last, “have you ever heard of a storm appearing in a prophecy before?”

“Only as a harbinger of something else, Headmaster.” Trelawney’s voice had recovered its pomposity. “They are common metaphors for battle, of course. Mere weather events have no place in prophecy.”

Albus nodded. He had thought the same thing before she spoke. “And you have no idea what the first stanza of that prophecy means?”

Trelawney shifted uneasily. “I have heard other prophecies in which ‘the old one that coils’ was mentioned, Headmaster.”

“And?”

Trelawney swallowed. “It always refers to a snake in some way. A descendant of Slytherin, often, or the Founder himself; there was one that prophesied a daughter of his line finding his ring in the fifteenth century. Another predicted Lord Goldfinger’s battle with dragons on the coast of Wales. Something serpentine, at least.”

Tom. Albus could not say he was surprised, though he would have to think for some time before he managed to tease out all the secrets of this riddle. He missed the clear prophecy that had told him so exactly what should be done with Connor’s and Harry’s childhood. The rhyming ones were always harder to figure out.

She may make more useful prophecies in the future, though, if she can see no visions again but those in which Tom has a part.

“Thank you, Sybill,” he said, and watched as Trelawney hurried away in relief. Once again, he studied the sunrise.

He would have to move more carefully than he had in the past. He had known that for months now.

But at least he would have the assurance that things were going his way again—in one case because he wielded a weapon too subtle for Harry to suspect, in the other because he had an advantage, in the knowledge of the prophecy, that no one else did.

He started to turn towards the staircase, and then paused, his eyes narrowing. He had seen a dark figure flicker beneath him for a moment, he thought. If he had not known better, he would have said it was a woman in a dark cloak, and that she smelled of smoke and fire.

And surely there was an echo in his ears, like a dragon's wild roar?

But then he touched the wards, and relaxed. He still had his little spies in among the ones that Minerva had supposedly tamed, and those told him that there had been no figure, woman or otherwise, on the side of the Tower.

Albus went on to breakfast, his stride firm and sure. It had cost him some uncertainty and some standing in the eyes of the wizarding world, but he was back in the game.

Important note, please read: With this chapter, "Freedom and Not Peace" begins heading into its climax. It will end on Chapter 70. This means, among other things, that this chapter ends in a MASSIVE FREAKING CLIFFHANGER, and so do the two chapters after it. Things also take an extremely dark turn after this chapter. If you don't like cliffhangers, or if you don't like suspense stretched across days, you might want to wait a while to read. I don't mind. (I'm also expecting a lot of people to simply quit reading after Chapter 61, so there's that).

Otherwise, enjoy! This massive bastard of a story is almost through.

Chapter Sixty: Day of Longest Light

A full year ago today, Harry thought in wonder, as he, and James, and Connor, walked to the edge of the Northumberland beach with their boats in their hands. A full year ago today was the last time we performed this ritual.

He paused a moment to lift his head and take in the sights and smells of the world all around him. The gulls were riding high again, and there seemed to be more of them today, as though they felt the year gone by deserved a salute of their cries. The waves crashed and hissed on the shore with an intonation that had become familiar to Harry from the constant way his heartbeat seemed to resemble it. The foam sparkled blindingly in the sun, which almost sat on the waves, filling all the eastern sky with a dazzle-storm. It was Midsummer, longest day of the year, the day of longest light.

The day of the Third Task.

Harry turned around so that he could walk backward and look at Connor. His brother's hands were steady, though his face was pale, and sometimes he got a distant, thoughtful look in his eyes, as though he were imagining the horrors that might come up and overtake him. Harry didn't blame him. Neither the First nor the Second Task had been uneventful.

They reached the edge of the water without incident, though, and Harry was glad. Connor wasn't a Champion at the moment, and he

wasn't a worried, anxious brother. They were both Potters, listening as James held up the little ship that he had created for this year's ritual and began.

"This is the holiest time. This is the time of longest Light."

Harry was pleased to hear that his father's voice was calmer than it had been last year; then, he had been about to spend a summer with sons whom he knew very little about, who had just witnessed the death of a godfather and family friend. Now, though, they were stronger for the trials they had come through, and things had been going well lately. Harry knew that Connor had passed his exams and made up his latest argument with Parvati. If he could just get through the Third Task without disgracing Hogwarts, then he would consider his year complete.

Harry himself...

Harry shrugged as he followed his father into the water, which shoved and pulled at his ankles like the Dark magic, urging him to come deeper. I've been better, but at least northern goblins don't send Howlers, and Draco's guardianship is not as irritating as it was.

"This is Midsummer morning, the moment when the sun shines in all its power, and magic can happen with its rising." James almost whispered the words as he set the little ship on the water.

This time, a wave lifted the boat higher right away. Its mast was not a yew twig this time, but laurel, and Harry didn't know where James had found it; no laurels grew near Lux Aeterna. The sail was cloth torn from the back of a painting, soft and black, and the sides were still ordinary parchment.

The black sail curved and gave back a faint reflection of the sun, and then Harry realized the sides had caught the light so brightly that it looked as though it were on fire. One sunbeam swept around the boat, and under it, and lifted it so that it just barely skimmed the waves as it sailed east.

James's face broke into a smile. He whispered, "We sail our ships, to welcome in the sun, to salute it, as we once sailed out of the sun on a Midsummer morning."

Harry knelt down and made that boast true for not just one Potter, but two. Connor's boat followed theirs the next moment, almost leaping out of his grasp. Harry, though, wasn't sure if that came from his brother's eagerness to participate in the ritual so much as the tremor that appeared to have taken possession of his hands.

Harry edged towards him, and caught his left hand, and stood there, holding it, as they watched their boats take the same sunlit road as James's. Harry was certain he could see the black sail of his father's boat long after it vanished, but at last it was gone completely, and he couldn't pretend anymore.

"I'm frightened," Connor whispered.

Harry felt his heart soften with the thought of how much it must have cost Connor to admit that. He wouldn't have been able to in Gryffindor Tower, and most of the time, he wouldn't have wanted to, either. Harry turned towards him and hugged him, his arms locking around his brother's shoulders.

"Do you remember your dueling spells?" he asked.

"Yes. It's not that." Connor shivered. "If I forgot a spell, then I would deserve what happened to me, after you've drilled me so long and hard. But I'm afraid of something unexpected happening. Of embarrassing myself in front of the school. Of—" He cut himself off with a little gasp.

Harry lifted his gaze quickly, to make sure that James still stood at a distance, but he was watching the sunrise with his hands in his pockets and didn't appear to notice his sons' preoccupation. Or maybe he knew and was courteously giving them space, Harry thought, as he touched Connor's heart-shaped scar. That would fit with the careful way that James was acting around them lately.

"Of your needing to rescue me again," Connor muttered.

"I didn't need to rescue you during the First Task," Harry pointed out. "The dragons would have hurt everyone, not just you."

Connor gave a sound somewhere between a snort, a sob, and a laugh. "The Second Task was bad enough in that respect, thanks." He hesitated for a long moment, then said, "I know that I can't make you promise not to interfere, but please don't do it just because you think I might be in danger, all right?"

"Of course," said Harry, and held him tighter again for a moment, before releasing him. "Now, come on. I think Dad wants to treat us to breakfast."

Connor scrambled out of the water, wiping one hand across his face. Harry knew it would take care of any tears that had gathered in his eyes. Connor was obsessed with being someone strong, and a strong boy would not cry. In fact, he smiled at James so brilliantly that James's smile faded a bit in return, as though he were trying to figure out what Connor wanted.

"You said we could eat breakfast on the beach," Connor reminded him. "Are we going to?"

James relaxed. "Of course," he said, nodding to the picnic basket that stood further up the sand. Connor's face brightened, and he went after it, drawing out a round of fresh apples wrapped in slices of cheese that the brownies had packed. He'd spent the last weekend with James, Harry remembered, and come back to Hogwarts gushing about the treat. Harry didn't think cheese and apples tasted so good himself, but if they would make his brother happy and take his mind off the evening for some time, then he was welcome to all of them he liked.

"Harry."

Harry turned and looked calmly up at James. Their father was chewing his lip, a gesture that made him resemble Connor much more than he normally did. He studied Harry as if wondering whether he would blow up or turn green, or perhaps inflict those things on him.

“What is it?” Harry asked, when the staring had gone on for some time. It must be important, for James to bring it up. Usually, when they were together, he let Harry guide their conversation.

James let out a sharp breath. Then he said, “Your brother asked me this last weekend, and made me promise that I would tell you my answer.”

Harry blinked. Connor hadn’t mentioned any important question to him. “All right,” he said.

“I still love your mother.”

Harry felt his shoulders try to hunch in defensive protection against his mother’s name, and then told himself he had to relax. James wasn’t intent on punishing Lily the way the rest of them were. He knew something about what Lily had done, and yet, obviously, it hadn’t killed his love. That meant that Harry might have another person he could feel safe with, like Draco—someone who knew the truth but was going to be reasonable about it.

“Why are you still living apart from her, then?” he did have to ask, since, as far as he knew, James hadn’t made any move to contact Lily or even visit her for nearly a year and a half.

“We’ve been writing,” said James. “We wanted to work everything out before we saw one another again. Or, at least, I did, and she finally agreed to it. There are still some attitudes of hers I’m finding it hard to get through.” His eyes fixed on Harry. “The ones about you, in particular.”

Harry nodded. He’d expected that. He plunged some of the emotions that were circling around in him at the mention of Lily into quicksilver pools. He could get through this. “And what point do you think you’ve reached?”

“I don’t know yet,” said James. “Maybe the point at which I can visit her by August or so.”

Harry nodded again. His own breathing was fast, and he felt light-headed. He didn't know why. This was entirely James's decision. It had nothing to do with him. And his father was going into this situation with his eyes open. He wouldn't be fooled again. He was only desirous of making up with as many people as possible, and why shouldn't he be? Harry knew that he himself would face his mother if he was a braver or a stronger person.

"I won't ask you to visit her," James said softly. "Not unless you asked me to take you with me. I promise. No forcing you into confined quarters with her. No trusting you alone with her. No bringing her here. You'll never have to see her again, Harry. I wouldn't expect that of you."

Harry inclined his head. "Thank you. In truth, though I know I'll be visiting Lux Aeterna for the summer, I don't know if I'll be living here yet, so you could bring her here as long as you warned me about it beforehand, in time to get away." He turned and looked at the picnic basket. He knew there were corn beef sandwiches in there as well, but he wasn't sure if he wanted anything to eat now. His stomach churned, and he had to swallow several times to convince what remained of last night's dinner to stay down.

"Where else would you—" James cut himself off. "Oh. You'd be staying at Hogwarts with him, then?"

The sound of his voice brought Harry back to reality, and Harry was suddenly glad that he'd made James promise not to mention Snape in his letters. Anger and what sounded like jealousy still bubbled under the surface of his words. It might have ended the letters if they were talking about Snape any more openly, and Harry did want this relationship with James. He wanted all the cracked places in his life to be healed, if he could, and James was trying so hard. It was not fair to scold him for this lapse now.

"I don't know," Harry said again. "Not for the whole summer, I don't think. The Malfoys have also invited me to visit." There had been a third invitation, too, but Harry had put it aside without reading it all the way through, and written a polite refusal. There was no way he was spending the summer at the Sanctuary, even if he would get to see

Peter and Remus there. He didn't need people peering at his soul and telling him all the means of fixing it. Besides, he'd be too distant from his allies and the rest of the world that might need his help.

"Oh," James sighed. "Harry, I wouldn't bring your mother into Lux Aeterna without warning you. I promise."

"I know," said Harry, giving him a small smile. "But I still don't think I want to spend the whole summer here."

"Why not?" Some of James's frustration broke through this time. "Do you still not trust me?"

"No," said Harry, and let James take that how he would as he went on. "The main problem is the wards. They'll let Draco visit, but not Snape, and probably not most of my allies whom I might want to see."

James glanced away with a frown.

"You won't consider lowering them?" Harry asked.

"I can't," said James. "The wards aren't entirely under my control. They're part of the nature of Lux Aeterna as a linchpin. They can't come down unless they're obeying my true inclinations, and things like subconscious hatreds are a bitch when it comes to that." Harry chuckled in spite of himself at his father's language. James said things when he was pouting that he never would have otherwise. "I might tell you that I could like Snape now, but the wards would know whether I really did or not, and refuse to fall if I didn't."

Harry nodded. He had expected that, and he even found it difficult to blame his father for it. He himself didn't do well with subconscious inclinations and tests based on them, or he would have found some way to free the northern goblins that didn't involve that stupid plan he'd first come up with. And he would have stopped missing the bond with Draco desperately when he removed it at midnight on the sixth of June. He should be able to conquer the things he was so weak about, he thought, but he couldn't.

And how could he scorn the weaknesses of other people that he found in himself?

“Dad,” Connor called through a mouth nearly glued shut. He’d obviously found the peanut butter, Harry thought in amusement. “Harry. Are you ‘ver coming to break’ast?”

James squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “I just wanted you to know that,” he whispered. “That I might see her again, speak to her.”

Harry forced out a breath. “I hope you do,” he said, and carefully controlled the emotions that wanted to pour into his words. “You both deserve to be happy.” And they did, he told himself. Revenge could only go on for so long. He wouldn’t willingly see Lily again, but he could rejoice, in an abstract way, that she lived somewhere away from him and was getting on with her life.

“Should we eat breakfast?”

Harry nodded, and in the end he did manage a corn beef sandwich and a few pieces of the cheese-and-apples that Connor liked so much, even though his appetite was entirely gone.

Harry shifted around anxiously, and tried not to resent it when Draco adjusted his position without a pause, so that he could keep his arms looped securely around Harry. They were sitting on the Slytherin Quidditch stands outside the hedge maze that would contain the Third Task, and Draco had deliberately taken a seat behind and above Harry, so that he could hold him. Harry shivered and shifted to the side again. He wanted to be free, ready to move, so that he could help Connor if he were hurt.

It didn’t help that they were outside the maze and could not see what was happening within, but then, Harry supposed, the people above the lake wouldn’t have been able to see what was happening under the water, either. Besides, he had a spell that would take care of that. Harry touched his wand, which he’d brought along in an attempt to get used to casting spells through it again, and stood up as if that would let him see over the hedges.

“Connor isn’t even in the maze yet,” Draco said in his ear, and yanked him back down, so that Harry plopped onto the bench ungracefully. “And I think he’ll be fine. You’ve been training him hard enough.”

“I don’t know,” Harry whispered in misery.

It was nearly twilight, but Draco was right; none of the Champions were in the Maze yet, let alone Connor. The sky was just turning the rich, deep purple that Harry had associated with summer sunsets ever since he was little. The air was thick and warm, and filled with the excited chatter of those students from all three schools come to see the conclusion of the Tournament. Harry had already seen several people glancing at him and shaking their heads. They thought he was stupid to be so upset about what seemed like the simplest of the Tasks, he knew: enter the maze, get past the obstacles, and find the cup in the center of it. Or maybe they were just waiting to see what way he would manage to interfere this time.

The judges were seated at a table near the entrances into the maze: Dumbledore, Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, and a few other witches and wizards whom Harry didn’t know. They were perfectly calm, of course. They could afford to be, Harry thought petulantly. They didn’t have a brother about to enter a maze and compete in a dangerous Task.

“Hush, Harry,” Draco whispered in his ear, and then altered the position of his hands. Harry thought, for a moment, that he might be leaving him alone so he could move about more freely, but then Draco’s fingers positioned themselves near his spine and dug in, massaging at a knot there.

Harry wriggled and tried to get away, but the Beauxbatons girl settled on the bench next to him made a face and shoved him back. Harry had to sit back and try to enjoy the massage as he waited for the Champions to be led to the front of the maze.

Connor had the lowest number of points right now, since he hadn’t properly rescued his brother in the Second Task, so he waited at the back while Karkaroff announced the Third Task to all and sundry.

Krum was edging towards the front, up to the very limit of the distance he was permitted to go right now, and scanning the Quidditch stands with his eyes all the while. Harry suspected, since he faced the Gryffindor stands, that he was looking for Hermione.

“Welcome, welcome, to the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament!” Karkaroff was speaking in a clear, resonant voice that belied the cowardly whimpers he’d used in every conversation with Harry thus far. “As you know, our brave Champions have undergone confrontations with dragons and merfolk beneath the lake, to test their courage and their compassion. We now face a task that will challenge their cleverness. Who can make it through the maze first, and overcome the obstacles that they will find there? This is not a Task in which just one spell will avail them. They must rely on their cunning to adapt their repertoire to the requirements of...”

Harry lost the thread of the speech as he watched Connor. His brother was less pale than he had been that morning, and he had his wand gripped in one firm hand. As the Task came closer and closer, he’d seemed to accept that there was no way he could get out of it, and that he might as well be brave. Harry wondered if he was the only one who noticed the way his brother’s eyes kept going to the maze and then darting away again. Certainly the only one who cared that much, he thought, and wiped his hands on his robes, then groaned a bit as Draco managed to soothe one knot along his spine away. The Beauxbatons girl gave them an annoyed glance—presumably she was also missing the speech under the noise of Harry’s groans—and edged away from them officiously, craning her neck.

“—and that is the Third Task of the Tournament,” Karkaroff concluded. “Our Champions will enter the maze in order of points scored. First goes Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang.” Unmistakable pride blazed in his voice as he stepped out of the way and nodded to Krum.

Krum nodded significantly at someone in the Gryffindor stands, and then raced into the maze. Harry watched the green leaves of the hedges waving, and pulled his shoulders away from Draco. He had to cast the spell as undetectably as he could, so he had to lean as close

to the maze as possible. Draco gave in with a resigned sigh, and leaned down to kiss the back of his head instead.

“In second place, Fleur Delacour, for Beauxbatons, will enter the maze,” Karkaroff announced.

Fleur drew her wand and walked into the maze with a flirt of her silver hair. Harry privately wished her luck. If Connor couldn't win, then he would prefer her to Krum as Champion. She was doing it for other reasons than just to impress one person.

A few more minutes passed. Once Harry heard a scream, cut quickly off. The other students shifted and murmured at that, but then went back to staring at the maze, as though they could really see through the hedges without the help of the spell Harry was going to use, or one like it.

The moment came, then, when Karkaroff cleared his throat, and said, “In last place, Connor Potter, for Hogwarts, will enter the maze.”

The name made another wind of murmuring move through the spectators, as though hearing it without the customary title, “Boy-Who-Lived,” made them think about Connor in a new light. Harry saw his brother's face flush with color, but he was ready, and all but plunged into the maze the moment that Karkaroff finished speaking.

“Specularis fraterculi,” Harry whispered, and gestured with his wand.

To his pleasure, the spell worked, and made the hedges transparent in one particular area, the one where Connor was walking, and only to him. Harry settled back against Draco, who promptly wrapped his arms around him again. Harry felt far more relaxed now, able to move in a moment if Death Eaters showed up. Connor was all right so far, simply walking along a corridor thick with leaves and open to the sky, with nothing threatening in sight.

Harry did crouch down in his seat a little as Karkaroff shot a suspicious glance towards him; as the closest to the maze, he stood the most chance of feeling a spell slide through the wards. Harry hadn't cast a spell to help the Champion of his choice, though, and

the wards had been erected mostly to prevent the audience from interfering in the competition. Thus they registered the passage of his magic, but didn't forbid it. Karkaroff wound up frowning and turning back to the entrance of the maze, craning his neck slightly, as though he could see over the walls and make out Krum that way.

With that suspicion dismissed, Harry could focus on Connor. His brother had reached a turning where a shimmering wall of solidified air barred his way. Harry held his breath. They had trained in no spells that were specific to this kind of barrier, and sometimes Connor could be very literal, probably from Hermione's influence; he would want to know the exact countercurse for a spell, when any that got rid of the obstacle would probably be just as good.

Connor only hesitated for a few moments, though, before lifting his wand and shouting, in a confident voice, "Reducto!"

The spell soared away from him, the barrier shattered, and Connor stepped through—

Straight into a mist that made him pant and drop to the ground, clutching at his throat.

Harry's fingers twitched on his wand, and he found himself wishing, oddly, for Regulus, who would know the source of his anxiety; Draco could only clench his hands on Harry's shoulder and hold tight. But Regulus was away, fastened to his body again, this time determined not to come back until he could reveal the location of his body beyond a doubt.

He has to be all right, Harry told himself, even though he hadn't tutored Connor in a spell that would get rid of obstructions like this at all. If he isn't, if he stands some chance of dying, then I'll intervene. I'd rather have him disqualified from the Tournament than dead.

But Connor proved to have a better memory than Harry anticipated. He called up a spell they hadn't practiced since last summer. "Specularis!" he exclaimed, waving his wand in front of him.

The word was half-choked by the gas, but it worked nonetheless, clearing a little window of air in front of him. Most wizards would use the window to see, but Connor used it to breathe, gathering his strength and flinging himself beyond the mist. Harry sat back again.

“Can you tell me anything about it?” Draco whispered into his ear.

Harry kept his own voice low, though he turned his head to the side instead of facing Draco directly, so that he could keep one eye on Connor even now. He was trotting down a broad aisle that appeared to lead directly to the center of the maze, though Harry knew that there was no way the obstacles would be over so soon. Krum or Fleur would have already grasped the cup by now if they were. “He was in the middle of a choking mist. He got himself free, and I thought he wouldn’t.”

“You really should trust him more,” Draco said, and let one hand run through Harry’s hair. Harry didn’t understand the fixation with touching him, but Draco seemed to have done it more since the bond ended. “I think he’s more competent than you give him credit for being.”

Harry did face Draco then, staring at him. Draco never had a good word to say about Connor.

Draco frowned at him, flushed, and jerked his chin up haughtily. “I can see when he’s improving in dueling spells, Harry. He was so hopeless before that any improvement would be marked.”

Harry wound up shaking his head and turning back to the maze. Connor had reached the end of the broad aisle in a seeming wall of leaves. Harry, however, trained in searching out tiny details, saw the recent signs of someone else having passed that way, even through his small window. Connor brightened a moment later, having discovered it, and reached out to swat the leaves aside.

A clawed paw shot through the leaves and dragged at him, pulling him into another place.

Harry gasped and half-jolted to his feet, then saw people turning around to stare at him. He ended up sitting down again, since he didn't want to reveal that he'd cast any spell at all towards the maze and Connor, but kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, as the window revealed a grassy corner covered with thick leaves and with a fountain in the center of it.

Connor was probably not in the position to notice much of it, though, because he was facing a wyvern.

Harry winced and leaned forward anxiously as Connor tumbled free from the creature's hold and rolled to his feet. The wyvern faced him, snarling and scraping menacingly at the ground with the talon it had used to haul Connor in. It was dragon-like, but it had only two legs, huge bat-like wings in the place of forelimbs, and, most dangerous of all, a darting, scorpion-like tail tipped with deadly poison.

Harry saw his brother's face pale at the sight of it. This was more dangerous than any creature he had faced before; at least he had not had to actually wound or destroy the dragon whose egg he took. He hesitated.

The wyvern leaped slightly in the air and came down at him, wings spread wide to prevent a dodge, claws grappling for him, tail whipping down and past its neck.

Connor flung himself into another roll, this one backwards and desperate, and came up on the wyvern's left side. The creature would have had him even then, but its wing caught on the fountain. It screamed and reared back, its tail coiling like Nagini at the height of its throat.

His brother had had a chance to regain his feet, though, Harry saw, and with it his confidence. "Speculum Ardoris!" he called, using the spell offensively, and a shield of fire whirled into being from the end of his wand.

The wyvern, unlike the dragons, had no immunity to fire. It cried again as the spell burned the edge of one wing, and snapped at it with

useless jaws. Then it was the one backing up, its wounded pinion held close to its side, its sulky yellow eyes fixed on the flames.

Connor moved towards it, instead of past the fountain and to the maze entrance on the other side of the garden.

“You idiot!” muttered Harry.

“What’s he doing now?” Draco whispered into his ear, massaging his shoulders.

“Attacking something he should be running from while it’s still baffled—”

Luckily, Connor seemed to get his common sense back at that moment, too. He shook his head, turned, and ran across the garden, ducking into the maze entrance. Harry relaxed for a moment, and then tensed up again when Connor made several hasty twists and turns, and brought another magical creature into view.

“Hello,” said the sphinx he’d met, carefully raising her long leonine body up and padding forward. Her face was human in general details, but with subtle differences, rather like the ones that had attended Dobby’s changed elven features. She had a literal mane of lovely red hair. She shook the hair out of her face and smiled at Connor. “I suppose that you want to pass me?”

Connor blinked, obviously nonplused by the creature’s politeness. “I—yes, that is. If you’ll let me.”

“Just answer the riddle,” said the sphinx. “Answer it correctly, and then I’ll let you pass.”

“What riddle would that be?” asked Connor. And then, just as Harry had known he would, he added, “And what happens if I don’t answer it correctly?”

“I eat you,” said the sphinx, in the dreamy manner of a young girl who’d heard that she was to have chocolate biscuits later that day.

Connor's face went pale again, and he swallowed hard. To Harry's relief, though, he didn't try something stupid, like darting around the sphinx, all of whose four paws looked swift enough to catch him in seconds. He said, "What's the riddle?"

The sphinx arranged herself with a little cough, and began to speak in a voice both more piercingly lovely and more alien than the mostly human voice she'd been using so far:

"We are always dancing, we are always there,

But you shut us away beyond the walls of the air.

"You adopt our name for the brightest lights among you,

But we are the originals, and we are always true.

"Glimpse us only half the time, it will not our beauty mar,

For we have always been more steadfast than all humans are."

Connor frowned intently and considered it for some time. Harry could almost see the moments when he might have blurted an answer out, but each time he shut his mouth and frowned again.

The sphinx cleared her throat at last and said, "No offense, but if you don't come up with an answer in the next five minutes, then I get to eat you."

Connor jolted, and his head lifted as if he were going to stare right into her eyes and dare her to do her worst. But his eyes fixed on the sky above the walls of the hedge maze instead, and his face broke into a smile.

"Stars," he said. "The answer is stars?"

The sphinx cocked her head and said, "Is that a question?"

"It's an answer," said Connor, though his smile had wilted a bit.

The sphinx inclined her head and stepped gracefully aside, bending the hedge wall with her weight. "Pass."

Connor whooped and surged past her, turned a corner, turned another corner, and came into a wide, grassy plot, darker than the rest of the maze—but that, Harry thought, might have come from the fact that the sun was setting at last. In the center of the plot, on a block of gleaming ivory, stood the cup.

Fleur was there already, closer to the cup than Connor was, but she was staring, entranced, at something hovering in front of her. They were star-like lights, Harry saw, whirling around each other in constellation-like patterns to draw and hold the eye. They were physically harmless, but if they could enchant the Champions and prevent them from reaching the cup, then they would serve their purpose.

Connor slowed when he saw her, and stared when he saw her predicament. Then the lights split in one half, and one stream came straight for him, the rest still bobbing and dancing in front of Fleur.

Connor closed his eyes, and Harry saw him aim straight for the ivory block without opening them. The star-like lights accompanied him all the way, but since they seemed to work by sight alone, they served no purpose except to form an honor guard as Connor made his way to the cup.

Harry still didn't believe that this was happening until Connor's hand reached out and grasped the cup, and all the hedges turned transparent at once—revealing Krum only a few steps from the grassy plot—and the wards fell.

There was a moment of stunned silence, by which Harry conjectured that no one had expected Connor to actually win. Then the people in the stands surged to their feet, cheering. Even some of the die-hard Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students, who'd made sure to sneer at Connor in the past, were applauding.

Harry let out his breath, and used his window spell one more time to make sure that Connor was actually all right. His brother looked

winded, but he'd taken no wound from the wyvern—who he probably owed for getting to the cup so fast, since he'd skipped some of the more obviously twisty passage by going through its garden—and the star-like lights had dissipated.

Fleur shook her hair out, blinked, and grasped the situation with one glance. Harry saw her mouth twist, but she walked towards Connor and shook his hand, murmuring a few words too soft for Harry to make out. Connor smiled at her and squeezed her wrist for a moment, blushing as she smiled back.

Krum had to gather himself for a few moments, probably to master his disappointment, but he inclined his head shortly at Connor. Connor nodded at him and said something about “wonderful Seeker,” which made Krum grunt.

“The Champion of the Triwizard Tournament,” said Karkaroff, in that same deceptively resonant voice he'd used before, “is Connor Potter of Hogwarts. Will the Champions come out of the maze, please?”

Connor was content to follow Fleur's lead along the path she'd taken, Harry saw. He still looked dazed. He had come very far from making an embarrassment of himself, Harry thought, nearly ready to burst with pride. He'd won, and that was something that not even Harry had expected.

He felt Draco hug him exuberantly, and he gave him an absent hug back. His attention was fixed on his brother, and getting to the front of the maze in time to welcome him. A lot of people were crowding up behind the judges, but Harry was sure they would let him through, once they recognized his relationship to Connor.

They left the Slytherin stands and migrated across the Pitch, stepping around several groups of people who were chattering in low, sullen voices, and kept their backs turned to the maze. Harry snorted at them. They just couldn't be happy for someone who'd won against all the odds, could they?

Draco kept pace at his side almost all the way there, but at last shook his head and let Harry go in front of him with an amused smile. Harry

nodded at him gratefully and then lengthened his stride. Magic helped him dodge between grass blades and over small holes that might have tripped him up, reaching Connor quickly.

Connor saw him and smiled like a lightning bolt. He grabbed Harry in a tight hug, which was uncomfortable, as he hadn't let go of the Tournament cup, but which Harry was more than willing to endure. "Thank you," he whispered into Harry's ear. "I couldn't have done this without you."

Harry couldn't deny that, since he'd taught so many of those spells to Connor, and hugged his brother fiercely back. Then he stepped out of the way, since the other judges were coming forward to congratulate Connor. Madame Maxime in particular had her hand out, seeming to decide that she should be the epitome of graciousness, no matter how much she might wish her own Champion had won.

"A shame Viktor did not get it," said Karkaroff, from behind Harry. "Alas, that he was too slow." He sounded more resigned than angry.

Harry grinned at Karkaroff, willing to forget their usual guarded conversation in the wake of his brother's triumph. "It was a good try, though. I'm sure he would have been a worthy winner."

Karkaroff nodded. "I would have enjoyed congratulating him," he sighed. "But I should not have thought he would win. I did not spend enough time instructing him in the spells he would need."

"Why not, sir?" Harry asked, curious that Karkaroff would blame himself. He hadn't been able to see what was happening in the maze, after all, and he should fault Krum's slowness more than his own instruction.

"Because I was doing other things," said Karkaroff, mistaking the intent of his question. He sighed again and lowered his voice. "Waking the sleeper, for example."

Harry blinked, trying to remember where he had heard that phrase for a moment.

He was a moment too slow.

Karkaroff's right arm latched firmly around his waist. Harry tried to lunge away, but Karkaroff's left hand was already on one of the buttons on his robe, twisting it sharply.

Even as Harry tensed himself to resist Side-Along Apparition, the Portkey went into motion, snatching them both from Hogwarts and bearing them towards an unknown destination.

Harry flew, and tasted bitterness on his tongue while he listened to the exultant laughter ringing in his ears. I was wrong. Karkaroff hasn't forsaken his old allegiance after all. He was their sleeper.

He did not doubt that he was going to the Death Eaters, and Voldemort. Grimly, Harry began preparing himself for what he would find there.

Thank you for the reviews on the last chapter!

I know I said at one point that the end of "No Mouth But Some Serpent's" was the darkest chapter set I would ever write. Um. I lied. Um.

This chapter is very nasty. It is disgusting. It is the reason for the eventual severe gore warning at the beginning of the story. It once again carries a MASSIVE FREAKING CLIFFHANGER. And it is not the end of the darkness. It begins a stretch of painful chapters that don't let up until Chapter 70.

I'll understand if people either want to wait to read it for a few days, or quit reading the story. I mean it. I didn't know how bad it was going to be when I started writing it. This hurts.

With all due warning, now it begins.

Chapter Sixty-One: Crucio, and Worse Than Crucio

Harry was ready when the Portkey deposited him and Karkaroff into the middle of some cool, dark place, obviously far from Hogwarts. He reached out with his wandless magic, ready to snatch Karkaroff's feet from beneath him and roll him over, imprison him in a cage of blue light, and demand that he tell Harry where they were—

And his wandless magic slammed into a barrier a few feet from him and fell back into his body, leaving him stunned and gasping, panting in so much pain that he didn't even notice for a moment that Karkaroff had snatched his wand from him.

"No insolence out of you, now," the wizard said, as he grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him forward. "My lord said that you won't be any problem, and so you won't." He spoke with a gay cheerfulness that Harry now thought was much closer to his true self than the cowering mask he'd presented.

Harry looked wildly around, trying to figure out what was going on. He saw neat grass clipped close, and headstone after headstone. They

were in a graveyard. Of course they were. What other stronghold would Voldemort choose?

But Harry was, at the moment, trying frantically to figure out what the fuck kind of barrier was confining his magic.

Perhaps it had only been in the place where they landed. Harry made another frantic bid for freedom, thinking that he wanted Karkaroff's left hand, which gripped his upper arm, to start burning—

And, once again, something threw his magic back into his body, harder this time. Harry doubled over, gasping, and stumbled. Karkaroff grunted at him in annoyance, and then picked him up and gripped him in a hold that Harry couldn't remember having learned, one that afforded him no chance to slip free.

"He's stubborn, my lord," Karkaroff called ahead into the darkness. "Keeps trying to use his magic even when he knows he can't."

Voldemort's voice responded, slick and cold, sharp, the first time that Harry had ever heard his voice in person since first year. "Potter would be like that. Bring him here, Igor."

Karkaroff bore forward. Harry used his eyes on the headstones and monuments they passed—rounded markers, angels, a few rearing blocks carved with words that blurred past too quickly for him to make out—looking in vain for some sign of wards that would explain his weakness.

Then they rounded a final corner, and Karkaroff carried Harry towards a gravestone marked with neatly cut words and half-overgrown with tangled weeds.

Tom Riddle.

Harry began to have a dim idea, then, of what kind of ritual Voldemort had brought him here to do. His stomach revolted, and he managed a few kicks before Karkaroff tightened his grasp so that even that was impossible.

On the ground next to the headstone was a large block of red-black stone that Harry didn't think was native to the graveyard. Beside it crouched a woman whom Harry recognized as Bellatrix Lestrange when she looked up. Her face was distorted with a creeping madness greater than she had ever worn, but she smiled at him gently.

"It won't be long now, baby," she said, and went back to wielding a silver knife awkwardly over something small and furry with her left hand.

Beside her was the chair that Harry knew contained the Dark Lord. Karkaroff dropped to a knee in front of it and held Harry close, twisting his neck so that he was forced to look closely at Voldemort.

Harry's scar burst into fire, a pain so sudden and devastating that he couldn't even cry out.

"Hello, Harry," said Voldemort, and stirred a bit. Harry could see that his skin was red-black, the same color as the stone in front of the grave marker. His arms and legs were thin and wispy, like pieces of seaweed attached to a great fish. His eyes were hungry and staring, as red as the brighter parts of his skin. "So long I've waited," Voldemort whispered. "So long I've waited for this."

Harry managed to roll under the pain of his scar. Lily's techniques for resisting torture ran through his head, in the calm voice his mother had always adopted when she recited them. Don't let the pain break you. Do whatever you can to get used to it and move to another level. Moments when they keep you at the same amount of pain are a blessing, because they allow you to adjust. Don't be afraid to scream.

He managed to say, forcing his jaw slowly open, "Didn't know...that you wanted me...instead of my brother."

Voldemort laughed, and Harry did scream this time as his scar lashed pain down from his forehead through his cheeks and his face, making him feel as though his teeth had turned to embers. Bellatrix laughed, too, rocking back and forth on her knees and clapping her left hand into her hidden right wrist, and Karkaroff gave a deep, rumbling belly

chuckle that nearly made him drop Harry. Harry tensed, ready to seize the chance if it happened again, but he didn't think it would.

"Oh, Harry," said Voldemort, his laughter trailing off into squeals like a dying pig. "The time for such pretense is past. I know that you were the one who bounced my curse thirteen years ago and condemned me to a lifetime of suffering. Your lifetime, Harry. And that time is nearly over. The debt is nearly paid." His voice surged with pride and deepened to something more like a hiss than a squeal. "As for why I can hold you so effortlessly...Bella, show him what you have with you."

"Certainly, my lord," said Bellatrix, and then turned and drew a silvery tray resting on the ground beside her forward.

Harry grunted when he saw the objects there, so much did they shock him. He recognized the ring made of ice enchanted not to melt, the triangular piece of ebony, the green stone, the red stone, the crystalline five-pointed stars...

Voldemort had performed a corrupted truce-dance. He was near the middle of it now, from the number of gifts, and that would mean—

Harry's eyes rose and shot over the gravestones to the faint, going gleam of the sun in the distance.

Sunset, on Midsummer Day.

Watch the sun.

Harry could feel his breath rushing fiercely up his throat as he gagged. The pain of his scar was not greater than his fear now, which made his nose ache and his stomach heave with bile.

Voldemort had tied his power to the sun. He must have begun it with the last Midsummer Day, the very day that James took Harry and Connor to the beach to perform the Potter ritual for the first time. So long as it remained sunset, he would have the power to enforce his will, and obviously, he now wanted Harry's magic bound.

Harry wanted to scream as his mind raced back along the line of the year, and certain coincidences that were not coincidences at all came forward and hamstrung him.

Regulus had vanished from his mind on the autumnal equinox, at sunset on the autumnal equinox, the very moment when light and darkness ceased to be equal and the power went to the night.

He had come back on the vernal equinox, again at sunset, as the light returned to the world and lessened Voldemort's power.

I am an idiot.

The only thing Harry could not account for was the lack of Voldemort's activity at Midwinter, the darkest part of the year and the one time when he would have even more power than Midsummer. But he suspected that Voldemort might have been lying low, or performing some ritual with effects that Harry wouldn't feel. It was perfectly possible, given how preoccupied he had been with certain other events at the same time.

"Now you understand," Voldemort said, and laughed aloud. Bellatrix joined him again, and Karkaroff, and another figure striding out from behind a tall stone angel. Harry lifted his head and saw Evan Rosier smiling at him, his fingers idly twirling his wand. "Corruption, indeed," said Voldemort, when he was done, "but I have had patience, and I have waited, honoring the cycle of the sun. In this moment, the day of longest light itself will serve my plans. For as long as it is sunset." His voice altered. "Igor, Evan. Tie him to the stone."

Karkaroff nodded and turned around. Rosier was already in front of him, whispering and performing an incantation that made straps sprout from the four corners of the makeshift altar. Karkaroff forced Harry flat, and though he kicked and squirmed and tried to get away, he and Rosier were able to bind him spread-eagle, held firmly enough that there was no chance he could get away.

Harry caught Rosier's eye as he adjusted the strap around his left wrist, and whispered, for the sake of trying to keep his mind off what

was coming, “You told us that it was both the moon and the sun we should watch.”

Rosier blinked a bit, then smiled and shrugged. “I lied,” he said. “I do that, you know.”

He turned in a swirl of robes and made his way over to the chair, stooping and lifting the child-Voldemort in his arms. Behind him, Bellatrix stood up, clutching a silvery bowl in front of her. Harry couldn’t see what was in it from this angle. Karkaroff was hastening back from a corner of the graveyard, dragging a large cauldron with him

“Hurry,” said Voldemort, hissing slightly as Rosier carried him over to the western corner of Harry’s stone.

“Here, my lord?” Rosier gently set the childlike form on the ground.

“That will do, Evan. You must take the east,” Voldemort snapped. “Hurry! Pass Igor Bella’s bowl, and hurry!”

The moment of greatest power won’t last long. Harry tensed his limbs and tried to buck his body to the side, but his head was the only part of himself he could move, so tightly did the straps hold him. Once again, his magic roared up within him, but this time, it couldn’t even move beyond the outer limits of his skin. They don’t have long to bind me, and do—whatever they’re going to do with Voldemort. I’ll hurt them again as soon as I can.

He used thoughts like that to calm himself as he watched Rosier take up a position to the east of him, Bellatrix to the north—behind his head—and Karkaroff to the south, at his feet.

Karkaroff began the ritual, his voice deep and urgent. “We bespeak the powers of the sun, the powers our lord has honored for the past year. By the power of the south and the summer, we offer the bone of the father.” He scraped up a handful of white dust and poured it into the cauldron near him, which bubbled and smoked.

Harry stared. Bone of the father...they opened Tom Riddle's grave and removed it? Once again, he had to gag on his own bile.

Rosier spoke, sounding less urgent than Karkaroff, even a bit amused. "We bespeak the powers of the sun, the powers our lord has honored for the past year. By the power of the east and the spring, we offer the heritage of the enemy."

He lifted something he'd taken from his robe pocket and blew it forward. Harry's heart constricted when he saw that it was a small boat, its sides made of parchment and its sail constructed of what looked like Slytherin green cloth. The twig holding the sail would be yew, he guessed, symbol of resurrection. The boat drifted along as though carried by an invisible wave, and plunged into the cauldron. More smoke, more bubbles emerged, and then an invisible force like a steel bar lashed across the middle of Harry's chest. He could not have spoken now even if he tried.

He could feel the power rising around him, deep and primeval, twisted Light magic, powerful as the Dark magic at Walpurgis had been. He remembered his father telling him that sunrise and sunset at Midsummer were moments of great power. For a moment, he had to close his eyes.

Bellatrix spoke in an oddly pretty voice, more feminine than anything Harry had ever heard from her. "We bespeak the powers of the sun, the powers our lord has honored for the past year. By the power of the north and the winter, we offer the flesh of the servant."

Harry opened his eyes in time to see Karkaroff tip the silver bowl Bellatrix had given him. Slivers of skin, with muscle and flesh still attached, slid down and into the cauldron. Harry shivered as a deep, foul smell filled the graveyard. Did Bellatrix cut those off her own arm? She must have.

Voldemort's voice spoke, filled with the feverish excitement of a child. "We bespeak the powers of the sun, the powers I have honored for the past year. By the power of the west and the autumn, I offer the blood of the enemy."

Harry thought he was prepared for anything, but that ended up not including the slight scramble of hands on stone and Voldemort climbing onto his chest. Voldemort stared down at him with gleaming red eyes for a long moment, and then chose his target and opened his mouth. His teeth were jutting things, spikes, barbs.

He bit into Harry's left shoulder, ripping down and hard to the side.

Harry screamed, forcing the sound around the two crushing weights on his lungs. He felt blood pour out of the wound, but what hurt most was the way those barbed teeth grabbed and caught and pinched at his flesh like hooks even as they worked their way out of it. He bucked and shuddered, and Voldemort slid towards the side of his chest, staring at him all the while. Harry's scar began to burn again, and this was the most physical pain he'd ever been in in his life.

"Evan," said Voldemort.

Rosier took a single stride forward, dipped a bowl into Harry's blood, picked up Voldemort with the other hand, and then turned towards the cauldron. Harry lifted his head and forced his eyes to focus through the haze of tears, wanting to see what happened. It might be important later. Maybe there was some way to reverse the ritual.

Rosier ceremoniously poured the blood into the cauldron. Then, not so ceremoniously, he tossed Voldemort in.

Harry stared as the baby-shape vanished. The smoke that immediately boiled free from the cauldron engulfed them all, and Harry had to close his eyes as it stung at them. The pain of his wound immediately sprang back to his attention and throbbed fiercely at him. Almost worse than the agony was the sheer sense of violation. Voldemort had bitten him, torn part of him away, disrupted the integrity of his body. Harry felt faint and sick, and not sure that he could have summoned his wandless magic even if the moment of sunset had passed and he were free.

The smoke soaring from the cauldron rose higher and higher, and Harry stiffened in shock as he heard a thin call breaking from it. It sounded like the wail of a baby, coming closer and closer.

Then the sound was in the graveyard with them, and it was no longer the cry of a baby, but the laughter of a man who just happened to have a high voice.

Harry felt power erupt from the cauldron as though it were a cresting wave, and lap over the headstones. He was shaking, vibrating, under the onrush of it. It was Voldemort's magic, and unless Harry was much mistaken, it was now stronger than it had been when he faced the bastard in first year. Voldemort's laughter rose with it, slick and dark, high and cold, like glass over stone.

Then a shape moved in the smoke, and Voldemort climbed out of the cauldron.

Harry had seen him as he was in the Pensieve memory of that night in Godric's Hollow. He looked much the same now: smooth, pale skin; a flat face without a projecting nose; thin lips; glaring red eyes. His hands patted at his body as Bellatrix rushed forward with a dark green robe to cloak him. Harry watched those spider-like fingers fluttering, and wished he could muster the breath or the strength for a scream of defiance.

"Yes, yes," said Voldemort, softly, as though he were well-satisfied with his body. "This is what I should look like."

He lifted his head, and his eyes locked on Harry's.

Harry felt, helpless to stop it, the curling claws of Legilimency ripping into his mind. He was a practiced Occlumens, but nowhere near as strong as Snape, and his defenses were further lowered by his shock and his pain and his lack of any means to defend himself. Voldemort studied Harry's memories, whatever he was looking at, in great interest. He moved too quickly through his mind for Harry to see more than a flashing glimpse of shapes and colors.

"Interesting, indeed," said Voldemort a moment later, when he had withdrawn from Harry's mind and left him shaking, violated once more. "There will be five Death Eaters not returning to us, then."

“Five, my lord?” Bellatrix looked up at him from where she knelt at his feet, once again moving the silver knife up and down over the small animal. Harry had no heart to try and see what it was. He turned his head as much as he could to watch the sunset bleeding in from the west, cursing, now, the fact that sunset on the Solstice was long and slow.

“Severus,” said Voldemort, hissing on that name. “Lucius. Hawthorn. Adalrico. And Peter.” He cocked his head to the side, eyes locked on Harry’s for a moment. “And Mulciber was betraying me in the moments before he died. It seems that our Mr. Potter here has a talent for convincing my servants. That shall not matter, after this night.”

He turned. “Igor, your arm!”

“My lord.” Karkaroff stepped forward, baring the Dark Mark on his left forearm. He sank to one knee, bowing his head, as Voldemort touched it.

Harry felt a call whip out from the Mark in the direction of the wider world, passing through the power that sealed the graveyard against Harry’s use of his magic—and, he guessed, the appearance of any of his allies, or else they would have been here by now—as if it didn’t exist. Voldemort tilted his head back, and whisper-hissed words that Harry could hardly make out.

“My loyal Death Eaters. Loyal to me, to no other, hear and heed the call of your master, and come to me!”

Harry had no doubt that the Death Eaters would be here soon. Voldemort meant to kill him in front of an audience.

If he will only delay until the moment of sunset is past, then I will give him a good fight. Harry was not sure that he could actually win. Voldemort’s magic was everywhere around him, and he was reminded, if he had ever forgotten it, that the Dark Lord was stronger than he was. So much raw magic, of a temper entirely different from Harry’s own, clawed and fanged and of a quickness that saw exactly what to do to make things hurt most.

Harry lay there, and waited, and hoped against hope that Snape would not try to follow the Dark Mark's call. He would be killed the moment he appeared, or, at best, held for torture later. The same thing would happen to any of his allies. Harry closed his eyes, and hoped, and tried to gather his strength against the aching anguish of the wound on his shoulder.

Someone moved close to him, and Harry opened his eyes, expecting to see Voldemort looming over him. Instead, Rosier crouched there, examining the bond on his left wrist to see how tight it was. Harry waited. He had no idea what to expect, now. Perhaps Rosier would loosen the strap.

He didn't do that, but he did smile at Harry, his dark eyes gleaming like daggers, and he said, "Everything is a game, Mr. Potter."

Harry recognized the phrase from the last letter Rosier had sent, but he didn't see what that had to do with anything. "Yes, you said," he murmured, turning his face aside. Rosier gripped it by the chin and turned it back. Harry jerked away as much as he could, though at the price of knocking his head on the stone and making his wound flare with hungry pain. His skin pimpled with disgust and distaste where the Death Eater had touched him.

Other Death Eaters were Apparating in now, constant sharp cracks making sure that Rosier's voice would not travel far from Harry's ear as he whispered, "You would do well to remember that. Everything is the game, do you understand, Mr. Potter? Every move that someone makes. Every word that he speaks. Every action he seems to take to proclaim his allegiance."

"I am not playing," Harry snapped.

Rosier raised his eyebrows. "Of course you are, Potter. The only ones who are not playing are dead." He winked, and then rose and swirled away from Harry to take his place in the circle forming around the stone.

Harry lifted his head and studied the Death Eaters in their anonymous dark robes and white masks, since he had nothing else better to do. He recognized the shapes of many more men than women, some squat and bulky, most of them more slender and moving with the innate, trained pureblood grace. Harry wrinkled his nose. There were Muggleborns and halfbloods who served Voldemort, of course, but these all seemed to be of the pureblood stock, with their useless prejudices and their memories of life lived to a higher standard that could only be had by actually living it, not following the actions of a monstrous madman.

Harry had not thought he would despise them so much. Perhaps he would not have, had he not, in many respects, been raised pureblood. He knew exactly what they were turning their backs on, what dances and history they claimed to respect and want back. Of course, they didn't want to have to live by those dances themselves, which would have demanded much harder negotiations with a Lord like Voldemort, rather than simply surrendering to his will. They merely wanted the world cleared of people who definitely didn't live by them.

Harry felt scorn coiling like a hot serpent in his belly, and used that to ride out the newest wave of pain from his wound.

In time, the cracks ceased, and the circle of Death Eaters tightened around Voldemort. He stood in silence for a moment, surveying them, and then nodded once.

"I have returned," he said. "Kneel." The word was a command, but, more than that, Harry noticed, an edge of compulsion rode it. He tugged at his bonds, wishing he could be free somehow. Then they might notice that at least one person wasn't kneeling to this Dark Lord who was misusing his power.

Everyone fell to one knee without hesitation, save Karkaroff, who was already kneeling by Voldemort's side. Voldemort smiled at them. Harry shuddered. His teeth were more horrible now than they had been when he crawled onto Harry's chest and bit him, because they appeared to fit more naturally into his mouth.

"I have returned," Voldemort repeated softly, stroking Karkaroff's arm, "because of the loyalty of Bellatrix Lestrange, Evan Rosier, and our very own sleeper, who spent years making the enemy trust him and despise him and think him weak." He clenched his hand down. "Rise, Igor Karkaroff, Headmaster of Durmstrang, Occlumens and Legilimens."

Karkaroff stood. His face had entirely transformed now, Harry saw, and it was relaxed and confident. He stood as though the idea of cowering had never occurred to him. He turned and bowed to Voldemort, his eyes fixing briefly on Harry. Their glance shone with mirth.

"No one has suspected me, my lord," he said. "I can assure you of that. And within Durmstrang even now are a small clutch of fledgling Death Eaters, wanting nothing more than to serve the great Lord of whom they have heard so much." He bowed again, and stood there like that until Voldemort whispered to him.

"Rise."

Karkaroff looked up.

"I am much pleased with you, Igor," said Voldemort, and Karkaroff nodded to him and fell back to join the rest of the circle. Voldemort turned and scanned the circle slowly for a moment, then said, "I am not so pleased with some of the rest of you. Crabbe. Come to me."

One of the heavyset figures gave what looked like a start, and then took a step forward. Voldemort's voice snapped out at once, like breaking ice. "Did I give you permission to walk to me? Crawl."

The figure went down at once, and Harry watched in disgust as Vincent's father crawled forward to the hem of Voldemort's robes. Voldemort let him get that far before he gestured with the long yew wand that Bellatrix or Karkaroff must have handed him when Harry wasn't looking and said, "Crucio."

Crabbe began to writhe and scream under the curse. Harry forced himself to watch as the robe flew back and forth, revealing pale skin

underneath it, and as Crabbe's limbs jerked and convulsed. He would be suffering the curse himself in a short time, he thought, and this way at least someone was witness to the suffering of others, as they would be witness to his. It was an odd bond to have with the Death Eaters he despised, but there it was.

Voldemort ended the curse when a line of drool began to run from Crabbe's mouth to the ground, and said, "You thought I would not return, did you not, Vincent? You believed that you were free of the service you once swore your life to. You are not, and never shall be. You will take your son at once from Hogwarts, Vincent, and raise him properly to be a Death Eater and follow me. I intend for him to have the Mark before a year from tonight." For a moment, he turned his head, his eyes gleaming as they fastened on Harry. "And I intend his first victim to be Draco Malfoy."

Harry gave another great heave against his bonds, but it was useless. Rosier had certainly not loosened them. He watched in helplessness as Voldemort sent Crabbe, blubbing protestations of loyalty, back to the circle, and then summoned and tortured a few others who appeared not to have pleased him. All of them broke and cried under the pain. Voldemort gave all of them tasks—mostly trying to recruit other Dark pureblood families—and sent them back into the circle.

Harry memorized the information, and watched the sun.

Voldemort doesn't intend for me to survive, but I will, in spite of him, and then this information will be important.

"And now," said Voldemort, his voice oddly sprightly, "we have a new Death Eater to be initiated. Cynthia Whitecheek, come forward."

Harry blinked as the brown-haired woman he had seen in his vision crawled out from the shadows, more flexible and graceful on all fours than most of the Death Eaters had been. She halted at Voldemort's feet and tilted her head up. Harry could see her crazed eyes fix on his face, and she took a long, deep sniff, as though she appreciated the snake-like scent that hung around him.

“Cynthia Whitecheek,” said Voldemort, “werewolf, consort of Fenrir Greyback, do you consent to serve me all the days of your life?”

“I do,” said Whitecheek, her voice a growl.

“And do you consent to be loyal to me, putting my goals and not your own first, for as long as you shall live and carry the Dark Mark?” Voldemort held out his wand near her left arm. There was no robe sleeve for the werewolf to push back, since she was naked.

“I do.” Whitecheek held up her arm, steadily.

“Do you consent to wear my Mark upon your skin, and take no steps to remove or alter it?” Voldemort’s voice was barely a whisper now.

“I do.”

Voldemort laughed, and then shouted, “Morsmordre!”

Whitecheek howled as a jet of black light shot from Voldemort’s wand and coalesced on her arm, weaving into the snake and skull. Harry watched it form and tried not to care, tried to make his mind float in a distant place from his body, but he knew what happened next, from reading the histories of Voldemort’s War, and his panting shook him.

“Your service is sealed in flesh,” said Voldemort. “Let it be sealed in blood.” He nodded over his shoulder, and Fenrir Greyback appeared, bereft of his mask. By the arm, he pulled a small boy. Harry guessed he was about eight years old, and couldn’t tell if he was Muggle or wizard.

Did it matter? They are going to kill a child.

Harry threw himself furiously against his bonds, grunting. They did not give. He reached out relentlessly, again and again, with his magic, testing the barriers, hitting them, and falling back with an effort that made his eyes blur and his head swim.

Voldemort eyed him, and laughed, and Harry’s scar burst into enough pain to cloud his vision even further.

Nevertheless, he saw the moment when Greyback released the dazed, sobbing boy, and Whitecheek edged forward, growling, then charged.

The boy tried to run.

Whitecheek was on him in moments, burying his small body beneath her own larger one. Harry watched, because he could do nothing else, and the boy should have at least a witness to his death. He saw yellowed teeth flash and bite down, tearing off the boy's right ear.

The boy screamed, so much pain in that sound, so much hurt that he couldn't understand the reason for. Harry, half-maddened, threw himself against the bonds again. Nothing happened at all.

Whitecheek tilted the boy's head to the side and used her thumb to pop out one of his eyes. She swallowed that, while the child wailed and pleaded, gone beyond coherent words now into one senseless world of agony. Whitecheek wasn't trying to torture him, Harry knew. She had no interest in prolonging the kill. She was eating him, and that was quite bad enough.

Whitecheek rolled the boy over, gripped the skin of his throat in her teeth, and ripped her head sharply to the side. Wail, and scream, and gurgle, and then the sound was drowned in blood, as the boy's jugular split and he died. Whitecheek lowered her head, rubbing her face in the blood, licking at it frantically, as though she didn't want any of it to escape. Then she rolled on her back, bathing her hair in it, and drew one of the boy's arms to her mouth so that she might bite off his fingers.

"Well done," said Voldemort, while Harry panted and felt his gorge and his guilt rise, "my newest disciple."

Whitecheek looked up at him, and then rolled on her back, baring her belly in submission. Voldemort laughed, and gestured for Greyback to cover her with the robe he held. The other werewolf hurried to do so, murmuring in her ear. Then they turned and began feeding on the boy together.

Harry closed his eyes, because he could now, and guilt was eating him like a werewolf of his very own.

He died. He died right in front of you.

And you did nothing.

Harry didn't think it really mattered that his magic was bound. He should have done something. What was the good of having all this power, if he couldn't even use it to save a child?

"And now," said Voldemort, "we have another entertainment planned for you, my loyal servants. A matter of vengeance, too long delayed."

Harry sat on the guilt and lifted his head, fixing his eyes on Voldemort. He's going to duel me. He must. He wants to. And then I'll be free. The sun was still setting, but it could not be very long now before it set completely, and the barriers on Harry's magic would fall.

Bellatrix crept forward to kneel at Voldemort's feet, staring into his face. "May I?" she whispered. "Oh, my lord, may I?"

Voldemort nodded, with a smile, at her. Bellatrix stood up and came towards Harry. Harry braced himself to resist a few Crucios from her wand.

"Oh, and Bella?" Voldemort asked.

Bellatrix turned and looked back at him.

Voldemort smiled, a sharper chop of his mouth than he had shown so far. "Leave him his wand hand."

Dim, crawling horror woke in Harry, as at the approach of a fanged beast, when Bellatrix said, with a simper, "Of course, my lord."

She turned towards him, and in her left hand she carried a knife.

Harry tried to struggle. He might as well have tried to push the world off course. He had to lie there as Bellatrix knelt next to him and held up the blade, admiring it. It shone and sparkled with an edge that Harry suspected must have come from the mysterious incantations that she put into it.

“You took my right hand,” she whispered to him. “It seems only right that I should claim a similar price from you. But since my lord wants me to leave you your wand hand, and that is your right one...” She shrugged, and let out a little giggle. “One must make do.”

Voldemort moved to stand at the foot of the stone as Harry kept struggling, arching his back and chest up. Voldemort observed him in silence for a moment, amused. Under the direct glare of those red eyes, Harry felt his scar begin to burn again.

Then Voldemort drew his own wand and whispered, “Crucio.”

Pain broke out in the middle of Harry’s chest and raced up and down. He couldn’t convulse to relieve it as Crabbe could, so closely was he held. He could barely tell when it joined with the agony radiating downward from his scar.

He felt the moment when Bellatrix took hold of his left hand and began to cut through his wrist, though, notwithstanding that the tightness of the straps should have numbed his circulation.

He screamed.

Voldemort laughed.

The Crucio burned.

The scar flamed.

Bellatrix cut.

Harry felt himself falling deeper and deeper into the pain. Lily’s voice whispered in his head—Don’t let it break you, ride it, roll under it, rise above it—but the words no longer mattered. Everything was pain,

glowing incandescent red-and-black, rolling like stormclouds above him. Everything hurt, it hurt so much...

He screamed.

Voldemort laughed.

The Crucio burned.

The scar flamed.

Bellatrix cut.

There was a bottom to the pain, and Harry hit it as he felt the bone and flesh begin to part. The knife bore straight down, and carried him to that point. Harry knew that he was not going to be able to do anything to stop it, even as he could not have done anything to stop the eating of the boy by Whitecheek.

His rage boiled, and then dived straight down into him with a scream.

He screamed.

Voldemort laughed.

The Crucio burned.

The scar flamed.

Bellatrix cut.

Harry felt his wrist part with a snapping, snarling sound, and knew his left hand was gone. He knew it, as much as anything, by the sudden increase of his hatred, by the way his wandless magic gathered and rushed towards what seemed like an escape from his body—

And found it only a trap, as it sparked and spun and spat out of control. Harry tried to harness it, reaching for the instinctive command he'd gained of it over the past two years, and it escaped him, running through his grasp like water.

Harry understood a moment later, in a single, despairing breath. He had bound his wandless magic so closely to his body, kept it so fastened to his skin, that a change in the structure of his body, a permanent hole opened like that, made it spill out wildly, untamed, unfathomable. He had lost control of his power, and there seemed to be no getting it back any time soon.

He screamed.

Bellatrix laughed, and Voldemort laughed, and moved away from the stone, lessening the pain from the scar and dismissing the Crucio with a flick of his wrist. Harry turned his head, inch by inch, to see the hand Bellatrix held.

She smiled at him, and then gestured with her knife and whispered something. Harry cried out again as the spell cauterized his wound, preventing the bleeding from killing him and sealing his wrist as a stump.

He hoped that might help him regain control of his magic, but no such luck. It only went on spilling out of him, spitting uselessly, creating small whirlwinds in the grass. Harry tried to tell it to untie his bonds, to strike at Voldemort, to hit and kill Bellatrix.

Nothing happened. The magic did not have to listen to him, so it did not.

Panting, more helpless than he had ever been, with his wrist on fire, Harry stared as Bellatrix whispered to him.

"I've put spells on the knife, baby, incantations I worked months on. You'll never be able to fasten a hand on that ugly stump again. No spell will take, every false hand will fall off, and mediwizardry will just slide off it." Bellatrix laughed aloud, and then held up the hand she'd cut off.

"As for what I'm going to do with this, that's another part of the incantations."

She slid back her sleeve, and Harry saw the ruin of her right hand, where he'd severed her wrist with the Sectumsempra. Other slivers of flesh were gone from it, too, where she'd cut the meat and muscle from her arm for Voldemort's resurrection. She slid Harry's hand down to rest against the arm, and then chanted three sharp words that Harry didn't think were Latin.

His hand squirmed, and melted, and changed shape, and turned in the other direction. It was a right hand that settled against Bellatrix's right wrist and melted into it, until only the different color of her skin let Harry tell where his old hand had begun. Bellatrix smiled at him, and shook her fingers, and took the knife into her right hand.

"A pity I will not get to do anything else with you," she whispered. "My lord wants to duel with you, and will give you back your wand."

Harry turned his head to see Voldemort standing there, Harry's cypress wand in one hand, a smile on his mouth.

"Come, Potter," he said, and broke Harry's bonds with nonverbal severing spells. "We will dance."

Without control of his wandless magic, Harry knew, Voldemort would kill him. He would die here, with so much left unaccomplished, suffering from the pain they caused him, and Voldemort would be free to walk the world again and cause more suffering, especially if Harry really had been the Boy-Who-Lived that the prophecy had chosen.

He would die.

And he would not be able to help anyone anymore.

The diving, screaming pain in him hit the icicle cage in which he'd confined his Dark fury and broke it wide open. Harry felt the emotions spill through him, making his face contort and his right hand—his only hand, now—reach out and catch the wand that Voldemort threw him.

He hated.

Oh, how he hated them.

There would be no one coming to save him this time, Harry knew, no one who would prevent him from unleashing his rage and hatred as he had done against Umbridge and against Lily. No Snape, no Draco to bring him back. He would die here, spending himself in fury and loathing.

And part of him—the part that had screamed at his own uselessness when he lay there watching the boy die under Whitecheek, the part that was sickened by his own folly in not controlling his wandless magic some other way, the part that had opened the cage and let the fury out—was fiercely glad of it.

Thank you again for the reviews on Chapter 61!

This chapter once again has a MASSIVE FREAKING CLIFFHANGER, but it is the last one in a row that does. Also, fic warnings are relevant again, especially the one about emotional upset, and Harry's, um, kind of not sane right now.

I assume that I will probably be posting another chapter tomorrow, but later in the evening.

The title of this chapter comes from a line in Swinburne's poem, "Hymn to Proserpine."

Chapter Sixty-Two: Deep Death Waits

I never knew, Harry thought, as he stepped away from the altar and approached Voldemort with his wand clutched tightly in his hand, that I could hate this much.

The hatred stole his breath. It rushed and throbbed in him like another heartbeat, or like the love that his mother had once trained him to have for Connor. It was everywhere he looked, making the sight of the gravestones or the Death Eaters pale into insignificance next to the two largest things in his life. There was Voldemort, and there was his pain—the one present in front of Harry, the other something he wanted to achieve.

Voldemort watched him come, head cocked to the side, smile lazy. His voice, when he spoke, was low and had just a slight twist that Harry knew meant he was probably speaking in Parseltongue.

"Do you not understand what will happen here, Harry? You are done with. Your chances are dead. Your magic is spilling out of you, and will run wild until you die at the end of my wand." He lifted his own wand slightly. "And there is no doubt that you will die. Have you thought about what our respective wands are made of?"

Harry halted a few feet from him and stared at him in silence. He didn't say anything back. He didn't think that Voldemort wanted a response, and besides, he couldn't have given one. The words would have emerged from his mouth not as words, but as a shriek. He could

feel the magic he still had control of, the magic that could be channeled through a wand, gathering itself like a leopard ready to spring.

Voldemort swung his wand back and forth. "My wand is yew," he said. "Symbol of resurrection, of returning from death. And the phoenix feather within it is simply an extra promise. I was always going to return, Harry, and I was always going to defeat you.

"Whereas yours..." Voldemort made a grotesque motion with his mouth that Harry supposed was symbolic of curling his lip, since he had no lip to actually curl. "Your wand is cypress, Harry. Do you know the legend of cypress? It is the death tree. Cut it once, and it grows not again. The branches are hung in mourning, and for remembrance." Voldemort lifted his wand higher, smiling. "I shall enjoy facing and hurting you one more time, my young nemesis. But remember. This was only ever going to end one way."

He moved a step forward and swung his wand in a sharp cutting motion. "Imperio!"

Harry opened his mouth as the Unforgivable Curse hit him. He was laughing, but the laughter sounded like nothing he'd ever heard before. It was the choking sound of an animal dying in a trap.

He felt only intense contempt, flaying his throat from the inside out as it rose.

Does he think to take me with that? Does he really think my will can bend now?

The Imperius Curse hit his shields and faded into oblivion. Harry raised his eyebrows to Voldemort's stunned stare and smiled mockingly. This time, he thought he could manage to speak, and in fact, words came out when he strained for them. "I'm not bowing to you, Tom."

As he had suspected it might, the name made Voldemort bare his teeth in a silent snarl. He spoke in Parseltongue instead of English, again, his voice a low and intimate hiss. Harry wondered, faintly, if

even Voldemort thought his words were ridiculous, and that was the reason he was speaking like this, instead of announcing it in such a way that all his Death Eaters could understand. "You have no idea what you are doing, boy. You will pay in a thousand waves of pain for every insult you have flung at me."

Harry lifted his head. He could feel hatred pouring from him in waves, as though he had just climbed out of a dark ocean. It was wonderful how it felt not to care about anything anymore, not to know or feel it when he surpassed a boundary. He was out of control anyway, his greatest weapon still spilling uselessly from his cauterized wrist. Why should he give a damn?

He aimed his wand at Voldemort, and called. His wand magic, old, faithful friend, the one he'd mastered long before he tried wandless, came rushing at his call as he whispered the words, remembering the beach last summer.

"Accendo intra cruore."

The Blood-Burning Curse came from him easily, fluidly, and he saw Voldemort's eyes go briefly wide before he waved his wand and countered it. Harry didn't mind. He'd expected that this would be no easy fight. Voldemort was newly returned to power, and he had always had more strength than Harry did. The trick was to keep moving, and to have another spell at the ready on your lips, and he did.

That acquaintance with Rosier was quite useful, after all.

"Cor cordium flammae!"

Voldemort hissed briefly, but countered it with a spell that Harry had never heard of, and which made him decide that Lucius must have been lying about there being no countercurse to Burning Heart but from another wizard's wand. Harry shrugged lightly. He didn't care. Everything around him felt light, drifting, and he didn't know why he'd been so frightened of madness in the first place. He was going to die, Voldemort had seen to that, so why shouldn't he have some fun before he went?

“Crucio,” he cast, and the hatred was there to fuel the Unforgivable, and, perhaps because Voldemort hadn’t been expecting it, that actually made him stagger for a bit. Then he dismissed it with a Finite and glared hard at Harry.

It came to Harry that he had an advantage in being so much smaller and lighter, and he really should use that. As Voldemort cast a Blasting Curse at him, he dropped to the ground and rolled behind a headstone.

The headstone took the force of the curse instead, which Harry thought was nice of it. He patted the stone in thanks, and then rose up from behind the marker, facing Voldemort again. He had had a thought. He turned it over in his head and admired it. It was pretty, if sharp.

“What do you think you are doing, Potter?” Voldemort whisper-hissed. “Do you really imagine that you can escape, even now?”

“No,” said Harry absently. His thoughts continued to turn. He had lost control of his wandless magic, and right now it was doing nothing more than flashing in useless purple lights around him. But wand magic was controlled with incantations and movements of the hand. He should be able to accomplish what he wanted to do, as long as he wrapped it in a unique word and wrist movement. Intention was usually a third component of spells, but, given the hatred baying inside him right now, Harry didn’t think that he would have a problem with that.

“Then what are you doing?”

“Hurting you,” said Harry, and smiled at him, and decided that he had never heard of a spell that used this word before. Not cleaning charms, and not mediwizardry, and not ordinary spells. And the wand movement—hm. A quick swish to the side and then back up again at a ninety-degree angle would work, he thought. Most spells used angles less than that.

Harry heard himself, as if from far away, begin to hum.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at him, but, this time, cast a spell in Parseltongue. Harry didn't recognize it, and had no preparation against the blow that caught his chest and began to squeeze about his lungs. It was literally turning the air in them to something else, he thought from his distance. Perhaps lead.

He concentrated, and said Finite Incantatem in his head, moving his wand in the proper motion. That spell was an old one, learned early in his training, and nonverbal magic was still magic that had to be done with a wand, most of the time. The sensation in his chest faded.

Yes, his word and his wrist movement were ready, and the intention aimed itself as Harry began to walk towards Voldemort.

Why not?

Harry lifted his wand. He could almost feel the dragon heartstring core tingle as he released his power in a stream through it, and he sang out the word he had chosen for his spell. "Exsculpo!"

The spell was new, and for just a moment, Harry could feel his magic fighting to take the shape he wanted, seeking a familiar incantation and not finding it. He gave a little sigh and pushed his will forward. Really, he wanted Voldemort to suffer. Was that so hard to achieve?

The spell trembled, and then obeyed him. A jet of purple light shot from his wand and landed on Voldemort's stomach, while the Dark Lord laughed aloud.

"You are trying to erase me as you would a slate, boy?" He sneered. "It is not that easy to get rid of me."

"Not erase," Harry whispered, smiling. "That's not the only thing that word means."

Voldemort had exactly half a second to look suspicious before his belly split open and the spell started trying to scoop his internal organs out.

Harry watched as a soup of gray and green and white—and really, why he had he expected Voldemort's insides to look at all like a normal person's?—started to fall to the ground. Voldemort tried to cast a healing spell on himself, but his voice was trembling with pain and shock and, Harry suspected, wounded pride. Little boys he'd set himself the task of killing were not supposed to do things like that.

Harry might have been content to watch and wait until Voldemort recovered, so that he could go on chipping at the man little by little and bit by bit, but just then something else happened.

The barriers around Harry, the ones that had bound his wandless magic in his body until Bellatrix cut his hand off and kept his allies away from him, fell.

Harry turned his head in that moment of deep silence, even though he knew he didn't have to look. He already knew what he would see.

The sun had set. Voldemort's sun-tied power, enormous though it was, had gone, and he had no ability to will Harry's magic motionless in the graveyard anymore.

Harry felt a smile flood his face, brilliant, dazzling, strong. He knew this was going to change nothing; he still expected Voldemort to kill him in the end. It was inevitable. Cleverness could only hold out against raw strength for so long, and Harry knew that this was the Dark Lord, who had spent years on years studying Dark magics, and doing sickening things to his body to keep himself alive at all costs. Of course he would win any duel they had.

But, for now, Harry was free to take a more complete vengeance than he had so far. He would give Voldemort something to remember him by.

He whistled softly, and got the attention of his wandless magic. It was no longer under his control, but it would at least pay attention when he called. Harry could feel its focus, as though it were a feral dog perking its ears to a once-familiar cry and deciding whether to come.

Harry asked if it was interested in hurting someone.

Tainted by his spiraling hatred, driven mad by his pain, it was.

Harry lifted his head, and fixed his eyes on Voldemort, who had repaired his belly. Through his eyes, from the bite on his left shoulder, from his severed wrist, the magic exploded. Harry didn't try to master it. He just threw a blast of absolute final force at Voldemort, and was happy in the doing of it.

The force caught Voldemort, wrenched him twice, spun him once, and tossed him into one of the grave markers. Harry heard a snap, though it wasn't the sound of a breaking bone; it sounded more like a twig. When Voldemort rolled back over, his left arm hung oddly.

Harry smiled at him.

Voldemort bared his jagged teeth in a soundless scream.

And his own magic rose around him, a Dark tsunami, deep and impossibly strong and unstoppable.

Harry found himself on his back, the magic swarming over him like snakes, held down by the strength of it just as he had been in first year. Knowledge and experience and old, old cruelty crouched over him. If Voldemort had ever been human, he had lost that distinction long ago.

Shall I teach you, child? his voice hissed from everywhere and nowhere, inside Harry's head and into his ears and just above his body. Shall I teach you what it is to hate?

And Harry felt it grab him and drag him and plunge him into foulness. This was Dark magic gone wrong, the force that had twisted and mutilated and fooled the Light magic into granting Voldemort the power to link to the sun through a false truce-dance. This was a force that bred webs, or broke them only for the Dark Lord's selfish ends. Harry felt dog vomit overcoming him, rising up, flooding his nostrils, filling his mouth and his ears with its weight and its stink.

He knew how his mother must have felt about him, now.

Drowning, he whistled again, and his magic cocked one ear.

Harry took a deep breath, gagging on the stench of evil not even present, and opened his siphoning ability.

The snake opened its jaws because it had decided that it wanted to, and began to swallow. The foul magic fell down its throat, and was not transferred to Harry, but borne elsewhere. Harry was just as glad. He was mad, maybe, but there was only so much of that stench and contamination that even he could take. He lay, and breathed, and felt the weight grow less and less.

Voldemort paused in that moment, and his inaudible voice laughed.

Harry, Harry, dear Harry. You are my magical heir, aren't you? I don't know how it happened, but that night, when I confronted you, I must have given you some of my own magical gifts. The Parseltongue was only one of them.

What you have forgotten, my heir, is that the ancestor is always better, faster, stronger.

Voldemort's own magic-eating ability became active. At least, Harry thought that must be what it was. It had teeth, though, not like his swallowing snake, and it swarmed his magic and ripped pieces out of it.

Harry screamed. This did not hurt as much as having his hand cut off, but it increased the sense of violation. His hand and his stump scrabbled at the ground, trying to stop the swallowing process. He did remember not to let go of his wand, but just barely.

So young, Voldemort's voice echoed gleefully in his mind. So innocent. So pure.

Harry drew a deep breath and reached out automatically to pull his power back into his body and out of danger. Once again, it slipped out of reach. Harry cursed, and sobbed, and asked the magic-

swallowing snake to open its mouth wider, politely, the way he would have asked a magical creature.

The snake obliged, and swallowed more, faster and faster. As Voldemort's magic grew fat and swollen with what he was stealing from Harry, it also lost that strength right away into Harry's magic. They'd become a snake eating its own tail, Harry thought dazedly, or perhaps, given the stink of Voldemort's evil, a snake eating its own shit.

Voldemort snarled at last, "Enough!"

Harry was not sure whether the command was in English or Parseltongue, but it had its effect. The creature that his magic formed stopped ripping and sucking at Harry's magic. Voldemort turned, instead, to defend himself against the loss of more power.

The snake swallowed a bit more, but then Harry asked it to shut its jaws and stop. It obeyed. Harry gasped, trembling with the force of the relief, and wondering what would happen next. His magic lay next to him, swollen, grown, and diminished. Since he could not touch it or estimate it any more, he could not know by how much.

What happened next was a high, clear song.

Harry tilted his head back. A spot of golden light circled above him. It descended nearer to the graveyard, and Harry recognized Fawkes. He stifled a groan. Why had the phoenix come? Neither of them could escape, and Harry was sure, now, that he would soon have another death on his conscience.

Therefore, Harry thought, as he scrambled back to his feet, the best thing to do was ignore the phoenix.

Besides, he had the feeling that Fawkes would want him to stop feeling hatred. And he couldn't do that. He stared at Voldemort, and the hatred became intense desire to destroy—anything the man held dear, anything he valued. The trouble was, Harry didn't think he valued his Death Eaters all that much, and there was no chance of breaking his wand.

Perhaps memories would do just as well.

"I heard you were looking for your diary," said Harry casually, as they fell into a circling pattern. He didn't know if he spoke in English or Parseltongue. Certainly looking at Voldemort's inhuman eyes was enough to make him think of snakes and speak their language. "Did you ever find it?"

Voldemort's gaze snapped to his face, and he sucked in a deep breath. "Where is it?" he hissed.

"Somewhere you can't find it." Harry twirled his wand between his fingers, and circled to the right, and smiled. "Too bad that you're going to kill me before I can tell you about it, isn't it?"

Voldemort might have replied, but Fawkes swooped over him, golden claws aiming for his face. Voldemort ducked, and Fawkes swept around in a circle, voice loud and sweet and urgent.

Harry shook his head regretfully at him. Fawkes represented something wonderful that he couldn't ever go back to. His emotions refused to be caged. He would die spending his anger. There was at least that consolation. He would die with his guilt and his shame safely buried, too, because death would pay for the death of the child he had not saved and cover up the shame of failing so badly as to lose his own hand.

Voldemort hissed a curse at Fawkes, but Fawkes dodged it easily and came to hover over Harry, singing loudly.

Harry shoved at him. "Go away, stupid phoenix," he muttered absently, more interested in the spell Voldemort was readying than what Fawkes might think about this treatment. "You should have bonded to someone more worthy of you. I can't help anymore, sorry."

Fawkes chirped angrily. Harry looked up, his eyes narrowed. I'm tainted. I can't go back. Can't he see that?

It was a small thing, really, his irritation at Fawkes compared to his hatred of Voldemort, but that was the emotion his wandless magic chose to answer, and it abruptly leaped out of his severed wrist and attacked the phoenix.

Fawkes sang a lament as his tail feathers frosted over, and he flew higher and higher, still singing, and probably, Harry thought, shedding tears. Harry shrugged, glad that he was beyond any danger now. Harry wasn't worth saving.

Voldemort's spell hit him then—a simple Blasting Curse, but it flung Harry several feet. He rolled, standing up almost immediately, glad to have a situation that he understood better than most. He had trained for this. He had known that one day he would die fighting. He really never should have let anyone convince him otherwise.

For the next few minutes, he was blind to everything but the battle. Voldemort flung curses, and Harry dodged them or raised Shield Charms against them. He threw hexes, and Voldemort turned them aside, or caught them, changed them in midair, and threw them back at him. Harry decided that would be a useful skill to learn, and he should try and learn it—

Before he remembered that he was going to die here, and parted his mouth in a soundless laugh. That did rather make all his worries about his future seem pointless. And, well, he was sorry for Draco and Connor and Snape and the others—for Draco most of all—but he could already feel the gathering power around Voldemort, and knew the man was almost done playing with him. He was preparing a strike that would take Harry's life once and for all.

Dying in battle against the Dark Lord. The fate I wanted, the fate I chose the moment I dedicated myself to serving Connor. How can I say that I didn't see this coming, or that I'm not happy to be here now?

He decided that he might as well go out in a meaningful way, and that meant that he did want to take one of Voldemort's Death Eaters with him, after all. He turned his head, and saw Bellatrix leaning forward from the circle, her lips parted as she watched the duel. Harry

narrowed his eyes at her, even as one of Voldemort's cutting hexes, like small knives flaying him all over his body, cut open the wound on his shoulder again. She wasn't good at defense. He didn't need his wandless magic to defeat her, the way he would have to have a chance against Voldemort.

He whirled to the side, presenting a tempting target for Voldemort. He knew the Dark Lord would hesitate a moment, though, unable to believe that Harry did not have some trick up his sleeve.

And Harry did. The trick just wasn't for Voldemort. He gripped his wand and raised it, aiming at Bellatrix, picturing her dead and glad of it. He opened his mouth, prepared to utter the Killing Curse for the first time.

"I'm bored," Evan Rosier, standing to Bellatrix's right side, announced abruptly, and then drew his wand and flung a hex at her.

Bellatrix, focused on Harry, didn't dodge it in time, and it caved in her ribs. As she fell to the ground, bubbling, Rosier winked at Harry, said, "I told you, you're interesting," and then turned to counter curses coming from the general direction of Greyback and Whitecheek.

Harry didn't have time to worry about Rosier. Voldemort was striding towards him, and this time, his magic rose like wings around him. Harry faced him, and knew this was the end. Voldemort might use the Killing Curse, or he would use something else—he probably would, so that Harry died in suffering—but his magic was like a looming wall, blocking out the last gleam of sunset and the last of Fawkes's song. Harry looked into death, and it looked back at him.

He didn't find it as fearsome as he might once have. Something had died within him when that boy did.

Voldemort smiled at him and made to speak, but then jerked his head to the side. Harry slowly followed his gaze, aware of a patch of silence there, but not knowing what he would see.

Dragonsbane Parkinson was striding forward between the gravestones, his black wrappings fluttering about him as if in a chill wind.

Words that Harry had nearly forgotten blazed into his head, words that Dragonsbane had spoken at last year's Walpurgis Night, when his prohibitions lifted and allowed him to talk to others with his mouth.

We will see each other again. And the next time but one is in a home of my kindred.

Harry had seen him with Hawthorn in the meeting in the Ministry at the end of August. And now he was here again, striding through a home of his kindred, a necropolis, a...

A graveyard.

The necromancer halted between two stone angels, and bowed to Harry, and lifted his hands.

And the dead arose.

Stone and earth cracked and creaked and groaned and shifted aside. Harry saw hands wrapped in bone, clad in cloth, wearing shards of wood as fingernails, scramble and tip aside the angels. Both of them missed Dragonsbane, who simply stood where he was, perhaps with his head bowed—it was hard to tell, given how swaddled he was—as the corpses stood and staggered past him, heading for the Death Eaters.

Most of the graves were breaking open now, and spilling out concoctions of dust and flesh, skeletons, nearly fresh bodies wrapped in shrouds, to advance on Voldemort's followers. Harry saw a few of the graves open but loose nothing save silver vapor. He supposed those were the ones with bodies so old that they had nothing to contribute to zombies, and could only produce something like spirits.

Dragonsbane stood in the middle of his kindred, and his hands flashed into view, pale and gleaming blue with the stone of his great ring, and he made several repeated motions, which Harry thought

were part of his sign language. When he reached the end of the sequence, he began again.

Harry shook his head, not understanding, not wanting to understand, and turned back towards Voldemort. It didn't matter that Dragonsbane was here, any more that it mattered that Fawkes had appeared or Rosier had turned. None of them would manage to stand against Voldemort's magic. At best, the dead might take some of the Death Eaters, and Harry was vaguely glad of that.

He could feel an equally vague fear that if he allowed the arrival of his allies to matter, then he would have to live, drowning in his shame and guilt all the way. He thought he would prefer to die.

Voldemort aimed his wand. Harry could see that he was no longer playing, the arrogance that had driven him to this in the first place pressed flat by the weight of cold facts. He began to intone the spell that had no counter, no shield, and Harry knew he would not survive it this time. There were no barriers on his magic to be broken any more.

"Avada Ke—"

Something hit Harry full force and rolled him over. Harry found himself beneath a cold, solid weight, one that barely yielded when he pushed and struggled. Dragonsbane rolled off him at once, but he had done what he wanted to do. The Killing Curse had missed Harry, the green bolt of light soaring over his head to strike one of the masked Death Eaters and fell him. Harry heard Rosier's laugh, and knew that he yet lived, as if that would matter to him.

Harry glared at Dragonsbane. The necromancer was making no move to rise, lying on his back and making the same sequence of motions with his hands again and again. Harry found himself irritated that Dragonsbane was keeping his vows even now, as if they mattered more than telling Harry what the bloody hell was going on, but more annoyed still that Dragonsbane had deprived him of a relatively easy death.

A slight snarl was all the warning he had.

His wandless magic, the magic he could no longer control, sprang and then came down on Dragonsbane, howling as though Harry's irritation had been a surge of Dark, irrational fury.

Harry screamed and reached out his left wrist, without thinking. More magic spiraled loose from the stump and attacked Dragonsbane, ripping and snarling and clawing. In desperation, frantic, Harry tried to grab it and hold it back, snatching at it in any way he could imagine—with reins, with words, with his wand, with a web.

Nothing availed. The magic might as well have been a completely separate entity from him, even as it fulfilled the wishes it must have thought he had.

It tore Dragonsbane's chest apart, and Harry knew before he saw the pale hands stop moving and drop to the blood-matted grass that his ally was dead.

And as if someone had turned a key in the lock of his head, sanity returned to Harry with a click and a snap.

Harry went to his knees, screaming. He didn't know what emotion most drove the scream: fury, grief, guilt, self-loathing. But all of them were in there, and all of them made him feel, once again, as if he would rather die, notwithstanding Fawkes's song ringing overhead or Voldemort's delighted laughter behind him or what was happening to the Death Eaters.

You can't die. The thought returned to him with brutal suddenness. You thought you could, but you can't. There is yet one more way that you might get out of this, one thing you haven't tried. You should have thought of it before, and you didn't, and now he's dead, but you've thought of it now and you're going to use it now, damn you.

If nothing else, you owe Hawthorn and Pansy an explanation for how Dragonsbane died, and you'll have to get out of here to give it.

Harry turned. He lifted his wand. Voldemort had stopped laughing and watched him thoughtfully, his red eyes narrowed.

He understood what Harry intended in time to join in, but not in time to stop it. That was fine with Harry. Determination was riding him now, driving him as simple will to survive could not have done. He bore guilt, and he must pay the enormous debt he'd just incurred to the Parkinsons.

"Legilimens."

"Legilimens."

Harry and Voldemort spoke the spell at the same time, and, leaping, passed into each other's minds at the same moment. Harry rode the sensation of wind inside Voldemort's thoughts, clutching his goal to himself all the while.

Damage him. Wound him deeply enough that you can escape with your knowledge and he can't just follow you, or break loose from the graveyard and start hurting other people.

Hurt him.

Yes, I think I can do that. I'm already a murderer, aren't I?

Chapter Sixty-Three: Of Hedges and Plains of Ice

Harry found himself standing in cold darkness. He shivered and squinted, expecting that at any moment he would grow warmer, or the light would lift and show him what sort of place Voldemort thought of his mind as.

Neither happened. Instead, Harry's eyes adjusted slowly to the darkness, and he realized that there were faint lights overhead—glaring arctic stars. He lowered his gaze slowly and moved his head from side to side.

He stood on a plain of ice, covered with snow, stretching off in every direction. Harry could see no hill or tree marking it, no place where the ground altered in any way. He edged his way forward, afraid that he would trip into a hole by the starlight, but though he stumbled, that came only from the slickness of the ice under the snow.

There was no sign of Voldemort's memories, or his weak points, or his defenses. Nothing but barren stillness wherever Harry looked, lying under a barely lit dark sky.

That was its defense, of course, Harry realized a moment later. In a place where nothing showed, nothing could be attacked. Any Legilimens who did manage to fight his way into the Dark Lord's mind would have frozen in bafflement, unable to conceive where he should search, and perhaps believing that his enemy had no emotions, no weak points, to attack.

Harry did not believe that. He had seen emotion on Voldemort's face, and even though it was covered over by Occlumency shields now, those shields had to be somewhere.

He lifted his head, but the arch of dark sky continued uninterrupted overhead, without a trace of a cloud that might have hidden anything vulnerable. There were the stars, of course, all isolated from each other. Harry contemplated calling up a wind and flying to them.

Hysterical urgency tried to pound in the back of his mind, telling him that he had to find the Dark Lord's weak points now now now, but

Harry managed to dismiss it. Yes, the stars were a possibility, but he didn't know if they would work. It wouldn't be like Voldemort to use light to hide his innermost weaknesses. Harry knew he hated using Light magic. He would have harnessed his powers to the sun only in utmost extremity.

Harry's gaze lowered to the ice and snow beneath his feet again.

Yes, he thought, that's a much more useful possibility.

He knelt and scooped up a handful of powdery snow, then shivered when it stung his fingers. The sensations here were much keener than he'd felt when he was in Draco's mind, or Connor's, or Snape's. It probably had something to do with Voldemort's status as a master Legilimens.

Harry didn't think he would make much progress trying to scrabble through the frozen ground with his hand alone. Luckily, he had another option open to him, if he could call it to him here.

Harry closed his eyes and remembered the animal he had been during his visions: mid-sized, covered with thick, warm fur, his paws draped with feathery hair. Perfect for balancing on snow, those paws, and tipped with powerful claws. They could help him both with running in this strange place, should he have to, and digging.

The transformation surged over him, taking him by surprise. Harry grunted slightly as he shrank, and shook his head as warmth enveloped his body. It was only something imagined, here, but imagination was as powerful as reality in a situation like this. It only remained to keep convincing himself that he really was warm, and not dissipate the protection.

He opened his eyes, and saw a right paw and a foreshortened left leg on the ground before him. Harry grimaced. It seemed that the trauma Bellatrix had inflicted on him had affected him enough that he couldn't shed the remnants of it, even here.

Maybe that's a good thing, Harry thought. Teach me to live with it sooner. And there are a whole bunch of things I'll have to live with.

He began to dig.

Turn. Spin. Lift head. Seek. He was in a deep green place, crowded with rustlings that laughed at him.

He hated being laughed at.

He lifted his wand and fired off a curse. It hit something in the general deep green darkness of it all, but only one of the rustlings ceased; the rest kept on, quieter but as obstinate and stubborn as before.

He hated all things obstinate and stubborn, unless they were so in service to him. Then the world had his permission to be as stubborn as it liked.

Move forward. Sniff. No smell but leaves and turned earth. Wrinkle of mouth; of course the boy smelled that way, since he took care to keep himself so innocent and pure, like the magic he'd swallowed earlier. No, he would think a bit of mud or corruption the stink of Lord Voldemort.

He might show that Lord Voldemort had been here.

As his eyes adjusted to the bit of light falling through the trees, he found that he was not in a house surrounded by trees, as he had assumed—of course the boy would have a house as a mind, or maybe a replica of Hogwarts—but a strange construction, partially hedge maze and partially forest. As if the hedge maze had been allowed to grow wild, he thought, staring at something that might almost have been the wall of a lane, thick green leaves scattered with gold. He reached out and ripped off one of the leaves, and was satisfied to hear a small, sharp shriek.

He moved a few steps further forward, cursing aside one of the sturdier trees when it got in his way. It fell with a crash.

Dark green and rustle and smell of earth and feel of leaf-flesh beneath his feet and taste of dark green in his mouth. Contempt and hatred and scorn and laughter and no doubt, no doubt at all, because

how could he doubt himself, Lord Voldemort, the mightiest Dark Lord and the mightiest wizard to walk the earth? Dumbledore was nothing to him, was nothing, had been nothing, would be nothing, will be nothing.

Somewhere, the hedge maze, the forest, would have a heart. Voldemort would find it and destroy it.

Move forward. Lift head. Curse aside a branch. Laugh at the foolishness of an enemy who truly thought that he could battle Lord Voldemort, master and accomplished Legilimens, on mental ground.

Begin.

Harry was aware of distant pain. Voldemort was no doubt adventuring around the inside of his head, finding things to disturb, and there was the wound on his shoulder, which he knew one of the Dark Lord's spells had reopened, and there was the sharp pain of his claws scrabbling on the ice in front of him.

But he kept digging. He lowered his head and used his teeth when he thought it would help, moving aside frozen soil and particles of ice that clung with irritating persistency in his mouth. When he spat, they should have either flown out or melted and run away, but all they did was cling to his jaws as cold water. Harry snarled and lashed his tail, and kept digging.

The rim of ice abruptly cracked, and Harry found a tunnel underneath. The tunnel was not filled with wetness, as he had thought it might be, but it was cool and dark, stone with a roof of earth. Harry gave a glad little growl and kept on tearing, scrabbling, ripping, widening, opening the tunnel more and more up. It might have taken a far longer time to open a hole for a human, but in his small new body, he had a suitable entrance in just a few minutes. He flattened himself to the ground and squirmed in and through.

He found himself in an intimately familiar place when he landed, his thick paws cushioning him from the fall, though he staggered off balance on his left foreleg for a moment. The tunnel was quiet and dark, lit only by a faint radiance like that from a Lumos spell, and filled

with tiny bones and skulls when Harry shifted. When he sniffed, an overpowering stink of rotteness assaulted his nostrils. Harry hissed and spat again, but this time he could be happy.

Voldemort's mind resembled the tunnel that led to the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry knew where he was going now.

He trotted forward, his tail up and his paws picking their way carefully among the skulls. His going was somewhat awkward with a left forepaw missing, but three legs and determination could do wonders, and soon Harry halted before a door marked with emerald-eyed serpents.

Fear paralyzed him for a moment. Though the graveyard had probably surpassed it by now, the Chamber was still the scene of what he considered his worst memory, the one he had seen when Dementors approached him.

Harry pushed aside his memories. He was good at doing it when someone else needed him to, and this was one of those times. He lifted his head high, and hissed out the command for the door to open in Parseltongue.

The door folded back at once, and Harry stepped into a place darker than the Chamber had been, darker than the sky above the ice plains, though still lit with that faint, moving yellow radiance, which Harry finally realized was focused on him, and shone from his fur. Perhaps because Voldemort's mind really was dark, perhaps because he was convinced it would be, he had conjured up the light and drawn it along with him.

Objects lay everywhere: carved cups, scepters, thrones, crowns, jeweled lockets like the one with Slytherin's mark that Sirius had found and which had possessed him, wands of rare woods, old books, jeweled swords, rings set with enormous stones, statues of emerald serpents with silver eyes and silver serpents with emerald eyes, bronze sculptures marked with grotesque signs of suffering and death. Harry hissed, knowing a lot more than he had ever wanted to about

what Voldemort valued, and worked his way towards the back of the room, where the statue of Salazar Slytherin had stood in the real Chamber.

He saw what he was looking for almost at once. Snape's voice flowed through his head, deep and resonant.

You'll find memories the most plentiful things in another wizard's mind. But don't be distracted by them if you ever get the chance to enter the mind of someone you truly want to hurt. You can look for the heart—the anchor of their sanity—or you can look for the center of memory. It's extremely hard to destroy, but if you can locate it, you can at least damage it. You'll recognize it as looking like a larger version of the memories, but there's only one of it, and it shines.

This did indeed shine, Harry found. It was a giant sword, plunged into the stone and held upright by a crack that gripped the tip of its blade, and covered with five jewels. One of the jewels was shaped like a cup, one like a book, one like a wand, one like a locket, one like a ring. Harry was not sure what the significance of that might be, but they did resemble some of the treasures scattered around the floor, and those treasures had to be Voldemort's memories.

Now, he only had to figure out how he would damage a giant sword made of what looked like to be hard steel.

Twitch of an ear. Lift of a head. Taste of the air ahead. He could do that, had adapted his tongue to do that, adapting his senses to be like the senses of poor dead Nagini.

The thought of her made him lash out, and another tree fell. He smiled, as the shriek of pain was louder this time. He intended to destroy the heart of Potter's mind, but that didn't mean he couldn't inflict many small wounds along the way.

Harry. Dear Harry. Dear dead Harry, who should have known not to challenge him on his own ground.

Deeper into the maze. Deeper. Around corners, pushing through walls of leaves, stepping past fallen logs overgrown with moss. Had

to be a center of this, had to be a heart. Had to be something around here.

A dart of movement to the side! Lifting of the head, narrowing his eyes.

Something living. Something unaltered, something that might die. He would never die, no, of course not. Death was for lesser creatures, creatures who were still mortal.

He followed, moving through the leaves like a predator. The living thing ran, and he hunted. He was always a great hunter, was Lord Voldemort. In days before he grew too many for such things, had too many followers to have to do it himself, he had enjoyed hunting the victims he sacrificed for power and knowledge. There was a thrill in the blood, the hunt, that was like nothing else.

Dart. Anticipate. Turn. The creature was going this way, he would go this way, and he would catch it.

He stepped out into the middle of the lane of leaves, and waited. The living creature would have to come this way.

But it didn't. He stood in the midst of green darkness, touched with the faintest hint of gold, and waited, and listened, and still the living creature did not come at all. Child or rabbit or dragon, it didn't come out, and then the bit of light faded altogether.

He lifted his wand and conjured a light. Leaves shifted around him, and there was more of the impertinent rustling. He cast again and again, and the rustlings cried out and fell silent.

But they had done their work. When he could see again, he stood in a completely unfamiliar place, the maze, the forest, having reassembled itself into a new construction and hidden away the darting living creature that he was now sure was the heart of Potter's mind.

With a snarl—what right did a boy like this have to defy a master Legilimens? He should have rolled over to bare his belly at the mere

chance of being near such greatness!—he forced his way forward, determined to find the path back to the living creature. He would catch it, and he would strangle it. Make Potter feel the pain and pay the price, as he had done for thirteen years of agony.

Harry walked around the sword several times, and still he could see no way of damaging it. He could not climb it; the edges were too sharp and too sleek, it really was nothing more than a great blade, and he would cut himself in doing so. Harry did not want to think about what would happen if he wounded himself in Voldemort's mind. The hilt was too far from the floor for him to jump to it and safely land on the crossguard, and scratching or tearing at the steel would have no result.

He sat down and lashed his tail, and then a thought came to him and made him feel very stupid.

I might have flown to the stars. What I imagine is real, here, and what I imagine right now is needing to be at the top of the hilt.

Harry thought determinedly about it, bending his mind in that direction, and ignoring all the “rational” thoughts that wanted to point out things like lynxes not being able to fly. He concentrated on the feeling of smooth metal rather than stone under his paws, and the floor being curved instead of straight, and how much he wanted to be able to do this and leave, instead of lingering here...

And it worked. The world jolted around him, and then he stood on the hilt, struggling awkwardly to balance on the immense curved guard that flanked the pommel. He snarled in triumph, and then lowered his head.

He had known, all along, if he could get to the hilt, that the easiest course would be to damage the sword by tugging out the jewels.

He locked his teeth on the yellow, cup-shaped stone, which might be a topaz, and began to tug. The stone barely projected from the metallic surface. His teeth were weary from biting through ice and the complicated, tangled root system that had underlain it. His body throbbed with exhaustion and pain and the longing to simply collapse

and let something else happen that he had no part in. But he locked his hind paws and his right front one into place and kept on pulling, thinking of what price he had paid—and which other people had paid, too—to get him this far.

The stone trembled, at last, and began slowly to tip out from the socket where it had been placed. Harry went on prizing at it until he was sure that it would come out, and then released it and turned sideways to stand on the hilt.

Just in time. The jewel uttered a loud groan and slipped out of its place, tumbling to the floor of the Chamber of Secrets far below. It hit the flagstones and shattered, sending large pieces of itself rolling away to hide among the treasures of Voldemort's memories.

Harry felt the effect at once. The Chamber around him shuddered, and a good portion of the cups and jeweled statues on the floor grew tarnished. He snarled, let himself have a moment of gloating, and then turned to attack the locket-shaped stone.

Pain!

The pain took him off guard, and that made him furious. What right did the boy have to hurt him? Pain was for lesser mortals, living creatures who were going to die. He was Lord Voldemort, and he was never going to die. He had taken enough steps to prevent it.

He turned his head, blindly seeking, and the leaves behind him creaked. When he turned around again, they were pressing into his face, covering his mouth and his eyes. He snarled and pushed them away, but his hand slipped over their slick surfaces. They were weak, and fragile, and they had no right to oppose him, but they were doing it anyway, and they did not seem to care when he began firing curses into them, burning and blasting many of them away.

He fell back a step, only to recover his ground, and felt a dart of motion near his heels. This time, this time, he spun, and lashed out with one arm, catching the creature by its shoulder. It tripped and

stumbled and fell, and then he had it, and it was staring up at him, the heart of Potter's mind.

It was a boy, about the same age as Potter, with blond hair and a pale face. Looked rather like Lucius, it did. He bared his teeth in a snarl. He had no idea why the heart of the boy's mind would be a Malfoy, but he had already paused to wonder too many times this evening. He should have killed Potter when he was tied to the rock.

He lifted his wand, prepared to cast the Killing Curse that would destroy the boy and the remains of Potter's sanity with it. The locket-shaped stone smashed, and Harry lashed his tail. Then he paused, lifting his head, twitching his nose.

Something is wrong. Something in my mind is in danger.

Harry could only guess that Voldemort had somehow found the heart of his own mind, or perhaps the place where all his memories were stored. He had no time to lose, and he knew what to do, as though someone had whispered a plan in his ear. He imagined himself with lead weights fastened to his paws, and he leaped into the air and then came down again on the hilt of the sword.

The sword shook with the weight, and groaned, and then tilted slowly to one side. Harry bared his teeth and jumped again, though he came near to staggering and slipping off this time. He didn't know how much time he had left before Voldemort permanently damaged him, and he couldn't worry about it.

Focus my gaze on the path forward. That's what I have to do right now.

He jumped one more time.

The sword tilted and began to crash down.

Harry jumped. This time, he fastened his mind on a destination not part of the Chamber of treasures that surrounded him. He fixed it on his body, kneeling motionless on the grass of the graveyard, and built

the image in his memory. Wand clutched in his hand, head twisted so that he faced towards Voldemort, legs folded beneath him, skin enfolding him...

I am here.

I am real.

I am home.

Harry gasped and opened his eyes, in time to see Voldemort begin spasming, as if the whole of his body were a single muscle that someone else had ordered him to contract.

He couldn't remember what he was about to do. There was a boy in front of him, but he couldn't remember who the boy was. He looked around, and stared at the leaves gathered near him, and wondered where they were. Had he come into the midst of a maze? The Forbidden Forest? Was he back in Albania, or perhaps in the untamed jungles of Africa?

The boy backed away from him, and then turned and ran. He stood where he was, not following. Other memories were shredding and diving around him, spiraling like stormclouds.

Where had he been? What was his name?

He had only one thing left to him as it seemed that all his memories might drain away forever: the fear of death, and the knowledge that, come what may, he could not die like this. Death was not for him.

He reached out, not in memory, but with an assured, guiding motion, the same way he would move his right hand. He touched a link that bound him to a secret place, a place that held one of the centers of his life. He tugged on the link, and it responded, the object it was bound to pulling him towards it.

He vanished, along the link, his mind folding into sleep, preserving the tatters of memory just as they were.

Harry stared as Voldemort's motionless body wavered, blurred, and then vanished. His blank red eyes closed in the moment before he

faded. Harry knew this was no normal Apparition, and suspected that he had done something to prevent himself from losing the rest of his memory.

Of course he would, he thought bitterly, leaning on his left elbow and panting in and out with steady breaths. It would be too easy otherwise.

“Potter.”

Harry turned swiftly, bringing his wand up in front of him. Rosier lifted his hands before his face, mock-cowering behind them. His laughter was deep, and assured, and amused.

“Good to see you that survived,” he said. “I shudder to think of how boring my life would become if you hadn’t.”

“What game are you playing?” Harry whispered, turning his head from side to side to see about the rest of the Death Eaters. They were gone, and most of the motionless forms on the ground looked to be the dead that Dragonsbane had raised, fallen when his necromancy dissipated or their foes fled or their raiser died. Only one robed body lay still, the mask half-off; it was one of the male Death Eaters Harry didn’t know by sight. Harry drew in a huffing breath, and wondered whether or not he should be glad that Bellatrix Lestrange wasn’t dead.

“The game of life,” said Rosier, with no irony in his voice. “The one I told you about, the one everyone plays. The one you could play yourself, Potter, if you were dedicated more to living than dying.” He cocked his head and studied Harry’s face. “Or perhaps you’re awake to living now. I should be so glad if you were.” He clapped his hands and smiled like a delighted child.

Fawkes circled down just then, his trilling song covering any reply that Harry might have wanted to make. He turned as the phoenix settled on his shoulder, and met his gaze. Fawkes stared at him with tears falling gently from his dark eyes. Harry studied them for a moment, and considered whether he should allow them to fall on him in the moment before they did.

He chose to let them. He would need some spiritual healing after—after. And he knew that he had to live now. He needed to get back to Hogwarts, reassure Draco and Snape and Connor that he was still alive, give everyone the information about Voldemort's return and about the actions he had commanded his Death Eaters to perform, and contact Hawthorn and Pansy about—

About.

Harry forced himself to turn and study Dragonsbane's body.

There could be no doubt that he was dead. Even necromancers weren't going to live with their chest cavities hollowed out and most of their major internal organs torn into small shreds. Harry felt a stir of magic in the air, and knew that his power was watching, half in and half out of his body, no more understanding that what it had done was wrong than a wild beast would.

Harry felt the edges of his grief soften and blur under Fawkes's tears. He bowed his head, and choked back the overwhelming bitterness of it.

Fawkes sang, and Harry saw the vision of what the phoenix wanted in his head. Fawkes wanted him to see that the ice on his tail feathers had turned to water mere moments after it formed, and that Harry had done him no lasting harm. He wanted Harry to cry out his grief, and then go back to Hogwarts and rest in the arms of people who loved him. He wanted Harry to sleep, and go somewhere where he would be safe, and learn to come to terms with what he had done, and lie down and rise up with peace in his soul.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, keeping his voice gentle. Fawkes meant well. Of course he did. A phoenix would not lie, though he might speak or sing in terms that would be misunderstood by any human not bonded to him. "I can't do that."

"Can't do what?" Rosier asked, sounding interested.

Harry lifted his head, and his magic snarled around him, remembering the way that Rosier had tested the bond on his left wrist

for tightness. "Go away," said Harry. His voice was, perhaps, not so much gentle as weary, and Fawkes's song increased in distress. "I can't deal with you right now." He lifted his wand.

Rosier gave a little huff. "All right then. There's no need to be so dramatic about it." He cocked his head, and met Harry's gaze directly. Harry was a little startled to find himself skimming across the surface of the Death Eater's thoughts. It appeared that his Legilimency extended beyond his eyes right now, floating unbound in the air around him, much like the rest of his wandless magic. Or maybe the magic was simply venting itself through this skill because it provided something for it to do.

Either way, Harry could make out implications of entertainment and pleasurable excitement beyond Rosier's eyes. No matter what happened to him, his life would be a lot more interesting now. He thought the Dark Lord still alive, and Harry was alive in a very interesting way. He would have to run, with his former comrades after him. This was so fun.

Rosier broke their gaze and turned away, sounding slightly amused. "My Lord created a false truce-dance," he said casually. "He fooled the Light into thinking he had a right to the power the sun gives on the equinoxes and solstices. I did tell you to watch the sun. Now I tell you to watch the sky. The primeval forces of the Light will find out the truth soon, and they no more like being tricked than the Dark magic of Walpurgis Night likes being confined." He grinned over his shoulder at Harry. "They will snap back upon my Lord. Already, I think, a wind has been summoned, and it will stir other winds. We shall have a storm, perhaps more than one."

"Why are you telling me this?" Harry asked.

Rosier's face sprouted a wider grin. "I keep telling you and telling you, Potter," he said. "It is a shame you never listen to me. Everything is a game." He Disapparated with a sharp crack.

Only after he had gone did it occur to Harry that he probably should have killed him. Harry shook his head. He—did not feel up to causing

more death right now. He was a murderer twice over this night, once by fact and once by omission.

He fixed his eyes on Dragonsbane, while Fawkes shed more tears. Harry did not use the clarity of mind those gave him the way the phoenix wanted him to. Instead, he used it to lay out all the facts before him and examine them, calmly, needing to know exactly what he was going to do when he left the graveyard.

One thing was clear. He bore the guilt of what had happened here. He should have been able to stop it, and he had not. He had failed his tests, and others had paid the price. Dragonsbane had sacrificed his life to bring him back to sanity, to recall Harry from being a Dark Lord—something he should have been able to do on his own.

How many failures?

Five.

Harry turned his head and looked at his left wrist. The physical failure.

He glanced at Dragonsbane. The emotional failure, and the magical one, and the moral one, that last shared with the half-devoured body of the poor boy next to Tom Riddle's gravestone.

And the mental failure, to let Voldemort inflict damage on his mind.

Harry shook his head, and closed his eyes. Two things were clear. He bore the guilt of what had happened here, and he meant to make sure this never happened again.

He would move forward from this point on. He would be strong. He would not fail another test. He would summon Hawthorn and Pansy at once, and tell them the truth of what had happened to Dragonsbane. He suspected that their alliance with him was ended now, that they would become among the deadliest of his enemies. That was as it should be. He accepted it. If it would not end his usefulness to other people, he would let them kill him. As it was, he would have to offer some other price, and resist only if they demanded his life.

He would return Dragonsbane's body to them. He whispered now, "Mobilicorpus," and cast a Disillusionment Charm on the body as it rose into the air. He did not want everyone gawking at Dragonsbane's wounds and wondering how he had received them when Harry Apparated back to Hogwarts. Voldemort's anti-Apparition wards had fallen when he vanished, so he could do that now.

Fawkes abruptly, frantically, grabbed Harry's chin in a talon and turned his face around. Harry blinked at him, wondering.

Fawkes sang again, and rubbed his plumes along Harry's cheeks. Harry could feel the temptation there, to fall into tears and what the phoenix considered healing.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered. "I told you, I can't. I can't afford it." He closed his eyes, and returned to his mantra.

Three things were clear. He bore the guilt of what had happened here, and he meant to make sure this never happened again, and he had a much better idea of his own weaknesses now.

He knew he would have to go to Draco, and to Snape. He needed their comfort after what had happened here. He would have been a stronger person if he did not, but he also knew he would collapse if he tried to go without it. So he would go, and accept this weakness into his personal list of them, acknowledging it and knowing it was there in the future.

He tasted thick bitterness for a moment, but he forced it away. Bitterness wouldn't help. Bitterness would drag him backward, and stand a strong chance of pulling him again into madness. Madness didn't help, either. He would go forward. He would do what would help, and he would force himself to be rational about matters.

He would explain to them his magical failure—because his magic could endanger others, now, until he had a chance of getting it back under control—the emotional failure—because that was what made his magic dangerous—and the moral failure—because they deserved to know what he had done.

The physical and the mental failures...

Those are my own.

Harry knew he couldn't explain them, yet. He would need some time, himself, to assimilate and deal with them, and if he explained them to Draco and Snape, they would insist that he relax and heal in the way that Fawkes wanted him to. Harry couldn't. Part of that was the time factor, because there was a war on, now, and the war needed him, and he just didn't have the time to collapse and work himself into a frenzy and then work himself back out of the frenzy.

Part of it was just another weakness.

I can't. That's all. I can't stand to see their pity for those failures right now. The others, yes, because I'm more likely to endanger someone else with them, and they're more likely to condemn them. Accusation is easier to deal with than pity. I will tell them the truth, eventually. But not right now.

Harry glanced sideways at his left wrist and wondered. Bellatrix had said that all efforts to replace his hand would fail—probably an attempt to increase his suffering and mental anguish to parallel hers in the months since he had taken her hand—but she had not said that he could not conceal it.

"Dissimulo manus!" he murmured, and waved his wand at it. The glamour of a hand grew from just above the stump. Harry carefully fitted it to the way he remembered things, and, soon enough, he thought proudly, no one could have told the illusion from the real thing.

I will tell them, he repeated, to soothe Fawkes's furious, sorrowful crooning. Just not right now. Later, when I can deal with it. I can't afford the time to break down, but I can think about it, little by little, and when I'm ready I'll tell them.

He hesitated, considering for a moment whether he should bear the little boy's mutilated body with him as well, but he had no idea where the child had come from or who he belonged to. Dragonsbane's body

he could at least be sure of delivering to his survivors. He might be carrying the boy further away from home, not towards it, if he took him to Hogwarts, especially if he had been a Muggle. In the end, Harry gently cast a glamour over the boy's corpse, to be sure it wouldn't be disturbed, and knew that would be one of the things he would include in the story of this night he sent to Scrimgeour.

The tale of his failures, he would tell to those he needed to know. The information that Voldemort was back, everyone who was important must know, as soon as possible. The loss of his hand and the damage to his mind would remain between him and Fawkes and the Death Eaters for now.

Harry shook his head, and took a deep breath, and gathered his strength. No trying to break the wards around Hogwarts so he could Apparate in, he knew. They were more important than ever, with the Death Eaters back and Voldemort moving. Harry didn't think he had damaged the Dark Lord's memory permanently, only enough to buy a little time.

"Ready?" he asked Fawkes.

Fawkes cried at him.

Harry shook his head slightly, and let his right arm rest on Dragonsbane's floating corpse, and Disapparated them all, Harry and body and phoenix, with a crack.

Chapter Sixty-Four: All Fall Down

Albus felt the pull of the boy's magic the moment he Apparated back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

There had been indications before then, of course: the sudden roar of rising Dark magic that made him fear Harry had died; the surging, triumphant laughter in his head that he heard, real or not, when Tom called his Death Eaters; the blazing of wards that were meant to alert him in the case of a concentration of Dark wizards in a certain area. But he had been able only to wait and to hope. He had not known what was happening from the moment of Harry's abduction...

Until now.

Harry was radiating uncontrolled magic like light, like heat, like fire, all the way up to the castle. Albus, sitting in his office and trying to think of strategies to combat Tom, felt him start to come closer as he would the tread of a nundu, or a rolling storm. Something had happened, something momentous, and Albus knew he would either fall before it—perhaps—or ride it—if he took the chance.

He closed his eyes and gathered the swirling mist of his compulsion, drawing it calmly back into himself. Perhaps a few people here and there in Hogwarts would blink or stare around in a daze, trying to remember what they had just been thinking about. Perhaps a few others would miss dreams they had grown accustomed to. For most of those who had slowly been turning to meet his opinion like flowers towards the sun, however, the influence had been too subtle. They would not notice it missing any more than they had noticed it present.

Albus had a better use for his compulsion, if what he imagined from Harry's slow approach was true. He held back until the boy was closer to the castle, within the wards, and he could open one of them as an eye on the outer grounds and actually see Harry's face.

The calm stoicism, laced through with pain to those who looked with clear eyes, told him all he needed to know. The constant soft tears of the phoenix on his shoulder—and Albus had to push back a flash of jealousy—were an even clearer sign. Something had happened to

deprive Harry of his balance, and he would be some time getting it back again.

Time during which a master compeller might be able to influence Harry's actions, if he acted quickly and ruthlessly enough.

Albus had only moments to choose his course. He did not trust what would happen if he tried to use his compulsion when Fawkes was not distracted by Harry's pain. And without complete information, he could not know that he was choosing rightly.

But he thought he was, acting on what he knew of Harry's past. And if he was wrong, there was at least one chance that could not do anything but help him, no matter how far down the road its consequences might play out.

He acted, and breathed out the compulsion in a concentrated, swirling mass into Harry's mind. Not even then, however, was it going to force him to choose one course of action. It would only make it more likely that he think of something he was probably thinking of anyway...let his thoughts spill to the side, down a certain well-worn track...seek refuge in a place he had often sought refuge in before...

And then it was done, and Albus sat back in his chair and opened his eyes, exhausted. A smile worked its way across his face in spite of himself.

The war had come. Tom had returned.

But the one disaster the Light could not afford—to have two Dark Lords working against it—had probably just been averted. Harry hated to admit it, but Fawkes's tears were getting on his nerves.

The phoenix would not stop crying. He had not stopped even as Harry walked wearily back towards Hogwarts, noting along the way that no one appeared to have waited outside the castle. Of course, he thought, most of them would have no idea what Karkaroff kidnapping him had meant, or that Voldemort was back, as yet. The students would have retired to the school, and the outside observers would

have gone home. His disappearance would be a matter of concern to a very few. Probably Dumbledore had felt that Voldemort had returned, and the former Death Eaters, and the Durmstrang students would be looking for Karkaroff, and Draco and Connor would notice he'd vanished, but otherwise, the wizarding world was in ignorance right now.

A pity that cannot last very much longer, he thought, and then stopped with a sigh as Fawkes gripped his chin yet again in one talon, turned it to face him, and began to sing. Harry stopped, since he didn't trust himself to keep walking forward and guide Dragonsbane's floating body around obstacles when he was like this.

Fawkes tried a softer song, warbling and drifting, ghosting gently across the surface of his mind. This time, the visions that appeared were more like dreams and less like messages. Fawkes was singing of the sun, Harry saw, and long, peaceful afternoons soaked in the sun, and white corridors. The white corridors coalesced as he focused on them. Harry had the impression that they were the image of a specific place, and that he had seen that place before.

Indeed he had. He recognized it in a moment as the Seers' Sanctuary, which Peter's mind had resembled.

Harry jerked himself backward, interrupting Fawkes's grip and sending him fluttering into the air. Harry recovered his balance and his breath, and shook his head at the distressed phoenix.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't. I told you that. Please don't ask me again."

"Harry."

Harry started and turned around. He would have expected either Connor or Snape to be the first one running to greet him, since his emotions had probably incapacitated Draco enough to put him in the hospital wing. But Draco, oblivious to what should have happened, stood behind him on the path past the lake instead, and then hurtled forward and grabbed Harry tightly in his arms in the next moment.

Harry hugged him back, letting his hand rest on Draco's spine, and holding his glamourised wrist just off to the side. He would have to be careful. Draco knew his emotions better than anyone alive, and Harry was sure that he was radiating pain and terror and rage and other things he couldn't anticipate even now.

"I felt pain," Draco was whispering into his ear. "But it was so distant. I think the connection between us decreases in intensity with distance. I knew that someone was hurting you, and I wanted to go help you, but Snape wouldn't even let me out of the dungeons until the pain stopped. Then he only told me that I could watch for you, and I had to stay within the wards to do that, and I had to come back inside at midnight if you hadn't shown up, or before then if any danger threatened." He drew back, staring anxiously into Harry's eyes. "What happened, Harry?"

"Voldemort came back," said Harry.

Draco's face paled, and he took a deep swallow.

Harry went on talking, trying to strike a balance between telling Draco what he needed to know and not choosing words that would send him into hysterics. "He took me to a graveyard and performed a resurrection ritual that used my blood to raise himself again." He closed his eyes, and the vision of Voldemort crouched on his chest and biting him seared in the blackness of his mind as if it had never left. Harry jerked his head back, not going far in the tight hold of Draco's arms, and then shook it and went on in a calmer voice. "Then he called the Death Eaters. He gave them—certain instructions." He opened his eyes and looked carefully at his friend. "Draco, I'm so sorry, but Vince's father is going to pull him out of school, and he's supposed to be trained to kill you before next Midsummer."

This time, Draco went white to the lips—yet, strangely, Harry thought some of that pallor was fury and not fear. "I thought he had given it up," he said. "I really thought he had. He told me that his father wasn't willing to follow the Dark Lord anymore, and I thought...I thought that meant..." Draco shook his head, and said, "Never mind. What happened then?"

Tread carefully now. “Voldemort tried to fight a duel with me.” Harry laughed at the expression on Draco’s face, but cut the laughter off. The sound of it made Draco stare at him and Fawkes let out a sobbing cry of distress. “Yes, I know. Stupid of him. But he’s stronger than I am, and he thought he could take me. And he probably could have, because they killed—I didn’t tell you that, they killed a little boy, a werewolf ate him, and I couldn’t do anything, and I wanted to die.” Harry had to close his eyes again, to smother the pressure of the tears on them.

“Harry,” Draco said, and squeezed him until he could hardly breathe. “Harry—you’re blaming yourself for that, aren’t you?” His voice tilted and crashed down into a mixture of anger and horror and pity that hit Harry like a lash and made him struggle to pull back a bit. Draco only tightened his grip, and Harry, weak with magical exhaustion and emotional drain, didn’t have much choice but to stay. “Oh, Harry, Merlin, don’t. I know you would have saved him if you could, because that’s the kind of person you are.” He stroked Harry’s hair. “So you really couldn’t save him. It’s not your fault. Please, stop blaming yourself. Merlin, no wonder you hurt so badly.”

Harry let his head fall forward so that it rested on Draco’s shoulder. He needed this, he told the parts of himself that wanted to stand back and not be so weak, he needed this time to have some chance of keeping it together long enough to fight this war, and it was a convenient excuse. Let Draco think all Harry’s pain had been emotional, and he would not look for a physical cause.

“Not only that,” Harry whispered. “I was gone during the fight, Draco. I lost control of my magic, and my emotions. My magic still isn’t entirely back under my control. Dragonsbane Parkinson showed up, and, well—” He lifted his wand and canceled the Disillusionment Charm.

He heard Draco gag, and turned resolutely to look. It was worse than he had remembered. The carnage had seemed almost natural in the graveyard, a home of death and the dead. In the clear starlight and wan moonbeams of a Hogwarts night, Dragonsbane’s wounds—the wounds he had caused and created, he must never forget that—were an obscenity.

“My magic killed him,” Harry said quietly. “He came to help, and my magic thought of him as a threat to me, and did that to him. He sacrificed his life to bring me back to sanity.”

Once again, he lost his breath as Draco squeezed him, and murmured fiercely into his ear.

“You didn’t do it. It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known that he would show up like that. They’ll understand, Harry. They have to. And meanwhile, you have to understand. You didn’t mean to do this. You’re not a murderer anymore than someone who accidentally spits someone on his sword is a murderer. You would only willingly kill to protect yourself or other people. Merlin, I love you.”

Harry found the words only small comfort—he would until he came to terms with what he had done, he suspected—but he pulled them around himself and held them close nonetheless. At least they meant that he had someone to whom he mattered, someone to whom his comfort was important just because he was him, and not because of the part that he could play in the war.

It would be so different if this were my mother...

He nuzzled his head into Draco’s shoulder and soaked up what the warmth and words could do for him, without demanding that they be something they weren’t. At last he lifted his head and nodded to show he understood.

“I have to summon Hawthorn and Pansy,” he whispered. “I have to tell them about Dragonsbane.”

“I know.” Draco smiled at him as he stepped away. The smile was wrenched to the side by a sorrow that Harry knew was almost as great as his own, as accepting of the consequences and foresighted about the future. “But, Harry, they’ll understand. I’m sure of it.”

Harry smiled at him, and then an accident happened, natural and unavoidable. Or maybe it was. Harry would have thought nothing of it on any other day, and that was why he allowed it to happen now.

He scolded himself afterwards, told himself to remember that he was living another life, one in which he had to deal with certain realities.

Draco reached out to take his hands. He confidently closed his fingers over Harry's right wrist.

His fingers passed right through the glamour of the left one.

Draco blinked and stared. Harry jerked his wrist backward, feeling hysteria pounding abruptly in his throat. No. I can't do this right now. I can't. I can't talk to him about this—

Then he heard the warning snarl from the side, and slammed himself back into calm, draining his anger into an Occlumency pool. I can't get upset, or my magic will attack Draco. Merlin, I couldn't bear that. Hold still, Harry. Maybe he doesn't know what this means. After all, it's not like anyone's mind would just turn to Voldemort cutting off your hand as a natural thing to have happen. Someone might think that if he knew the history of Voldemort's War, but Draco had been sheltered in that respect.

Draco blinked a bit more, his face still filled with blank surprise, and Harry summoned a smile. He might get out of this after all. He feigned a laugh. "Can't believe that happened!" he exclaimed, and aligned his hand more carefully this time, so that Draco would grasp the solid part of the stump that was still there. "We must have slipped in—"

Draco made a swift, darting motion, seizing his wrist this time and turning the replica of his left hand back and forth. Harry held still, and even raised his eyebrows as though asking what in the world Draco was doing. He thought he could escape this yet. It was not as if Draco knew his hands that well.

"Your left thumb doesn't curve that way," said Draco, sinking his hopes, and drew in a thick breath that rattled along his throat as though his mouth were made of sheet metal. He lifted his head, inch by inch, and Harry shivered as their eyes locked. Draco's had a sheer intensity that Harry had never seen matched, except by the keenness of the surface thoughts that Harry's involuntary Legilimency showed

him. "Harry," he said, each word carefully intoned, "remove the glamour."

Harry could hear his own breathing, rushing along his lungs. He shook his head. "There's no glamour."

"Do not lie to me," said Draco, in exactly the same way. "Harry, remove the glamour, and remove it now."

"I don't—" Harry turned his head away, feeling his face flush and the pressure of tears increase against his eyelids again. Merlin, why does this have to happen? It isn't right. He bit his lip to hold back a sob. "There's nothing there," he said, when he could force his mouth open again.

"I know that," said Draco, taking and twisting his words to have a meaning that Harry never intended for them to have. "Now, Harry."

Harry thought he should have held out against this. He was weak, so weak. Why couldn't he resist what was happening to him? Why couldn't he pass any of the tests that anyone made of him tonight? Should have been stronger, to resist Draco's pleas. Some have been faster, to prevent Draco from ever catching hold of his wrist in the first place and pressing matters this far.

"I'm waiting."

Harry swallowed, and acknowledged the failure, and removed the glamour.

He heard Draco hiss out his breath. Then he took up Harry's severed wrist and moved his arm carefully in a circle, no doubt examining the stump from all angles. Harry bowed his head, shivering. Draco's touch hurt where Bellatrix had cauterized the wound, but not much more than the bite Voldemort had given him. What really cut and flayed him were Draco's eyes, the knowledge that someone was seeing what he really was, and that he was too weak to hide evidence of his failure.

Instinctively, he tried to retreat, to curl his left arm close to his chest. Draco braced his feet and pulled, and Harry found himself stumbling forward, ending up in Draco's arms again. Draco was gripping his wrist with one hand, the back of his neck with the other, and murmuring a ferocious litany in his ears.

"Never hide from me, do you understand? I want to know everything you are. I don't care that you think you failed. You didn't. Come to me with things like this, Harry. Don't retreat." Draco's hand stroked his wrist, and Harry jumped. "Now, we can get a replacement hand—"

"We can't," said Harry. The words sounded choked. He hated himself for that. "Bellatrix cast spells on it so that I couldn't grow another hand there, or heal the wound, or get a replacement."

Draco stood in silence for a moment.

Then he said, "That bitch."

Harry shivered at the vehemence in his voice, and the more so because it was the only word Draco called her, as good as a vow of vengeance. He pulled back a moment later and stared into Harry's eyes, his gaze still strong and honest as a blade.

"It's going to get better, Harry," he said. "We're both going to make it better." He didn't seem to feel the need to add the words I promise or any equivalent. Like his epithet for Bellatrix, Harry supposed, they implied the rest of what they could mean by the simple virtue of being said.

Harry nodded. He couldn't speak around the lump in his throat, but he could nod.

"You'll come to the Manor for the summer," Draco went on, speaking with a calm, absolute authority that reminded Harry of Lucius. "We'll work on breaking the spells on your wrist. And then—"

"What? Draco, I can't!" Harry twisted, using some of the moves Lily had taught him when Draco tried to restrain him, and broke away. They stood there for a moment, Draco with his head cocked slightly

to one side and his gaze drifting back and forth between Harry's eyes and his wrist, Harry with his feet braced to resist an attack. His magic stirred around him, then settled uneasily, like disturbed mist. Harry took a deep breath and explained, even as he sprouted the glamour of his left hand again. "Look at it from my eyes. Your parents wouldn't rest until they found out the truth about my hand, would they?"

"Of course not," said Draco, but it was obvious he didn't understand how that connected to Harry's not staying with him for the summer. "There are several rooms in the Manor that are charmed to remove any glours that visitors are wearing, in fact. It wouldn't be long before they noticed."

Harry nodded. "And while I could trust your mother with that knowledge—" maybe, if I had to "—I wouldn't trust your father. It might even convince him that I'm weak and no longer worth allying with."

Draco opened his mouth. Harry waited.

Draco closed his mouth. Harry nodded.

"Maybe it would," Draco conceded grudgingly, and rubbed his forehead. "I don't think so, but it's at least possible that he would use the knowledge to gain an advantage in some way. He can't abandon you right now. I shudder to think of what else he could do within the terms of the truce-dance, though." Draco nodded, slowly. "Then you'll stay with Snape."

Fawkes gave a sad little croon, and from Draco's startled glance upward, Harry thought he, too, must have had a fleeting image of the pale couches and sunlit rooms of the Sanctuary.

"With Snape," said Harry firmly. "Not with the Seers." He frowned at Fawkes and kept walking. He would meet with Snape as soon as he got back to the castle, if possible. His guardian deserved to know that he had returned safely. Or, if he ran into Connor first, then he would reassure him. Either way, after those meetings, he would need to write a letter to Scrimgeour and one to Hawthorn.

Things turned out rather differently than he expected, though, because the cowed figure waiting for him near the doors to the entrance hall was Hawthorn Parkinson.

Draco had slipped away without a word, other than the faint whisper to Harry that he would tell Snape and Connor he was back. Harry nodded, and followed Hawthorn in silence to a small room he hadn't known existed on the third floor, Dragonsbane's body floating behind him. Hawthorn hadn't yet glanced at her husband's corpse. Harry couldn't tell what that meant. Perhaps she was so angry that she thought she would kill him if she looked?

Hawthorn opened the door to the room. Inside, a fire blazed on a hearth just swept free of dust and dirt. Three chairs waited in a triangle, one of them in front of the other two. And Pansy sat on one of those chairs, her hands folded on her lap and a very faint frown on her face.

Harry would have halted, warned her, cast another Disillusionment Charm, done anything he could to prepare her for the sight of Dragonsbane. Hawthorn did not. She simply took over the Mobilicorpus and guided Dragonsbane into the room, then set him floating in front of the hearth, next to Pansy's chair.

Pansy's face turned the color of whey, and then she began to cry. Harry bowed his head. He had resolved to himself to face this, or he would have run away already, but it was hard to be here. He had to call up images of several quicksilver Occlumency pools to keep himself still.

Hawthorn turned around. Harry saw that she was white around the lips, but the rest of her face was almost normally pale. She crouched down beside Pansy and put her arms around her. Pansy turned and buried her face in her mother's shoulder, winding her arms almost tight enough around Hawthorn's neck to strangle her, all the while weeping and weeping and weeping.

Of all the unworthy emotions to feel in that moment, the last Harry would have thought himself capable of was envy. But he felt it, and

he acknowledged it, and then he put it back in the Occlumency pool. He lowered his gaze and waited.

At last, Pansy's tears faded. She sat back up, and her mother conjured a handkerchief for her to wipe her face. While she did so, Hawthorn stood and took the chair beside her daughter. Harry sat down in the one in front of them at her slight motion.

"Tell us," said Hawthorn, her voice clipped and quiet, "what happened in the graveyard."

Harry blinked, wondering how she had known it was a graveyard, but began. He gave them the same recitation he had given Draco, minus the cutting off of his hand, and told the story of Dragonsbane's murder. He never looked away from Hawthorn's face, and she never changed expression.

Pansy's choked little sob in the middle of the story was almost enough to undo him, but Harry told himself he had no right to shed tears. He had broken the alliance. He had murdered Hawthorn's husband, Pansy's father. He had no reason to be here but to face his crime. So he told the story with his own white face and iron determination, and lapsed into silence when it was done. He wondered what they would do with him. He had already resolved to defend himself against nothing but a deadly curse, and then he would run from the room, more to spare his magic attacking either of the two women than to protect his own life.

Yes, women, he thought, teased by a stray thought, as he met Pansy's eyes at last. She is now. Every trace of girlhood was gone from her face.

Hawthorn said at last, "Tell me, Harry, were the signs that my husband repeated these?" She lifted her hands and began to guide them, slowly, through a sequence of motions. Harry squinted, making sure that the way her left palm turned was really the way Dragonsbane's had, and that she had made three snaps with the forefinger and thumb of her right hand, not two.

“Yes,” he said at last. “He showed them to me several times. I don’t know why he showed them to me, though.” He swallowed. “I couldn’t understand his sign language.”

Pansy hissed, a sound that seemed to start from a long distance away and gradually come closer, rather like Voldemort’s laughter at his resurrection. Harry shivered and shrugged away the comparison. “What makes you believe that it matters if you understood it?” she spat. “Selfish—”

“Pansy, that is enough.” Hawthorn embedded her last word in the middle of a growl. The look Pansy flashed her mother was full of betrayal, but Hawthorn took no notice. She only went on steadily looking into Harry’s eyes, and Harry thought that he was seeing the Red Death for the first time. “Harry. Dragonsbane repeated those signs to you on purpose. They mean, ‘Do not mourn me. This is my fate. Thus I die.’”

Harry could feel himself shrinking in his chair. “I—that’s not possible. Why—”

Hawthorn closed her eyes, seemingly the only concession to weakness that she would make. “Necromancers foresee the death of any wizard or witch they come into contact with, Harry,” she said quietly. “They cannot tell them the time or manner of it, however. It is a lonely life. But they also foresee their own deaths. And they keep living in spite of it. It is a life that takes more courage than I can understand.” She opened her eyes, and the first signs of tears marred them. “Did I tell you,” she murmured, “that my husband was not in Slytherin, though many people assumed and claimed he was, and even I almost believed so at times? He was a Gryffindor.”

“He didn’t—” Harry stopped. The conclusion was inescapable. He came to the graveyard knowing he would die.

“I suspected,” Hawthorn went on, her voice quiet, implacable. “They are forbidden to tell us lesser mortals outright, but it was there, in his signs for the last year. He wrote many long letters to those he had known and left behind in his former life as—well, it does not matter what his name was now, since he gave it up to choose a name that

echoed mine and to take my surname. He prepared his accounts. He spoke often and often with a certain spirit he could not name to me, but whom he said had told him tales of you, because he died defending you from a certain menace.”

Harry bowed his head. Sirius.

“I suspected,” said Hawthorn softly. “When my Mark began to burn this evening, he had me Apparate with him to Hogwarts, and then he—followed the link between my Mark and the Dark Lord. Somehow. I still don’t know how he did that.” She sniffed slightly, as though taking in the scent of sorrow. “That was when my suspicion coalesced into certainty.”

“How could you have known what signs he would use to talk to me?” Harry whispered.

“Because I have seen another necromancer use them,” said Hawthorn. “They are always the same, a sign that any necromancer will give before he or she dies, whether or not there are any around to interpret them.” She reached out a hand and held it motionless in the air between them. Harry had no idea whether or not she wanted him to take it, and didn’t move. “You must understand, Harry. Necromancers do not regard death as we do. It is not an ending to life, and they know that very well. It is only another stage, and in many ways, they revere it more than life. By saying ‘Thus I die,’ they are claiming their part in a ritual greater and more sacred than anything the living can grant them. That is why no necromancer would try to step aside from his death, even if that is possible, which I am not sure it is. That is the moment of inevitability, the moment when their vision ends.” Hawthorn turned her head away. “Harry, you were part of the instant when my husband closed his eyes to the world. You actually gave him the passage into death. You have done him more honor than you can imagine.”

Harry buried his head in his arms. The idea that he was not a murderer was too shattering for him to deal with right now. He had to think about something else instead, and he found it in the words, “How did you know that it would be in a graveyard?”

"I heard his words to you last Walpurgis Night," said Hawthorn. "When he left me to go to you, I knew it would be in a home of his kin. He died in a graveyard, Harry, among those he loved and honored. No necromancer could ask for better." She paused a moment, then said, "Harry. Look at me."

Harry lifted his head, blinking. Hawthorn had her left sleeve pulled up, and was tracing the silver scar that bisected the Dark Mark's skull. Harry shivered as he felt a tickling sensation start along the complementary scar on his own skin.

"The alliance hasn't broken," Hawthorn said, "or this would have burst open, and you would have bled to death. You did not. I think that is because my husband was a necromancer, and knew long before even you were born how and where he would die. You could have killed him deliberately, and that would have kept the terms of the alliance." She tipped her head, amber eyes full of light. "We are still allies."

Harry stared at him, and couldn't imagine what he would say next.

Someone else could.

"I'm not," said Pansy, her voice high and jarring.

Hawthorn looked at her daughter. "What?"

"I don't want to be allies with him any more." Pansy rose to her feet and crossed her arms. Her eyes cut at Harry in the moment before she turned her head away. "He killed my father. And maybe he chose it, and maybe it was always going to happen, but he was my D-Dad, and I loved him, and Harry killed him, and I don't want to be in the same alliance with him any more."

Harry listened in silence as Hawthorn tried to talk her daughter out of it. Pansy would not be moved. Harry had known it before Hawthorn tried to convince her otherwise. It was all right. He had received more than he deserved, with Hawthorn still believing in him. Both of them had known Dragonsbane was going to die, he thought, even as Dragonsbane had, but Pansy had thought of it as "dying someday"

and Hawthorn had suspected an actual date. Pansy was doing nothing more now than following her own beliefs and inclinations. It was as it should be. If she was recoiling from the shock that the sight of her father's corpse had dealt her...well, that was also her choice, even as it had been her mother's choice to reveal Dragonsbane's death like that.

In the end, Pansy bared her left arm and pressed it to the scar on her mother's, while Hawthorn murmured in sorrow, "Released from bonds of blood, released from bonds of flesh, released from bonds of alliance. May your solitary path be prosperous, my child."

Pansy staggered a little when the ritual was done. Harry felt the same thing, like the snapping of a cord he hadn't known was taut between them. Pansy nodded coolly at him and turned for the door.

When she reached it, she turned back. "I am going to honor my father," she announced. "I am going to do what he would have been proud of me for."

He met her eyes, and once again his Legilimency darted out in front of him, reading Pansy's intentions there. She was going to become a necromancer.

Harry blinked as Pansy slipped from the room. It was an unusual ambition, and one that he didn't know if she had the tenacity to hold to. But he wished her luck.

"Harry?"

Harry turned to Hawthorn and bowed from the waist. "Thank you," he said simply. "I—perhaps that wound will not go so deep, now." He didn't know that for certain, but it at least might help bleed off some of the venom, to know that Dragonsbane had known this fate was coming, and even embraced it.

Hawthorn eyed him narrowly. "Are you well?" she asked. "There is so much pain and weariness in your scent."

Harry dredged up his smile. "I'm all right," he answered. "In pain and weary, but as soon as I've seen my guardian—" he could not quite deny himself a visit to Snape, not now "—then I'll go to the hospital wing and rest, I promise."

"See that you do." Hawthorn stood, and then reached out for him. Harry let himself be hugged because he was too surprised to prevent it. "Keep yourself safe," she whispered into his ear. "You do not know how glad I am that you are alive, or how much we need you."

"I think I might have some idea," Harry murmured, thinking of what use he could be to the war effort. There was a small part of himself, a very small part, that really was excited at what was coming.

This is the war that I've been training all my life to fight. Harry met Fawkes not far past the door of the room where Hawthorn had taken him. She had let him go, finally, with one more solemn promise extracted from him to take himself to the hospital wing as soon as he was done with Snape, and gone to bear both herself and Dragonsbane's body to the outskirts of the wards, so they could Apparate back to the Garden. She had shown no sign of noticing his lack of a left hand, for which Harry was profoundly grateful.

Fawkes scolded him with a stream of notes as he walked towards the dungeons. Harry had so many images in his head that he couldn't even tell what he was being scolded for.

"Will you shut up?" he muttered at the phoenix as he passed down the main corridor towards Snape's office.

"I think he is very wise," said his guardian's dry voice. "After all, you bear many wounds that you have shown yourself capable of ignoring."

Harry looked up with quick gladness. Snape was striding towards him from an alcove along the wall. He met his eyes—

And his Legilimency darted out, picking up memories from Snape's mind in a swift trawl. Images sped past Harry's eyes, thoughts of how

Snape was guarding him from himself and regrets over having taught him to resist the De Profundis curse and worry that Harry would find out about the compulsion on Draco—

Wait.

Harry felt himself begin to shake. His eyes stayed fixed, though, and now that his Legilimency had a likewise fixed purpose, it sped forward, fleetly snatching more and more of the memories he wanted to look at.

Snape had given the Potions book to Draco. He had known, all the while, that the book bound anyone who opened it to complete a certain potion. It put a compulsion on them, one that made them ignore most other important things until the potion was safely brewed.

It put a compulsion on them.

A compulsion.

And Snape had known.

He had known.

Harry felt his mouth open, so that he was screaming without breath, without sound. His magic blew out past him and grabbed Snape, not hurting him for the moment; Harry was too deeply in shock to wish anyone pain. The magic simply suspended Snape in midair and twisted him around, watching him all the while as if he were some loathsome, tiny insect.

And then Harry's rage came bounding up behind the shock, and smashed into him.

He took a step forward, and saw Snape begin to choke, the magic forming into a pair of hands that gripped his throat. Harry thought someone else was present and speaking for him, until he realized that, yes, that really was his own voice coming out of his own mouth. Apparently, the magic had decided that he needed no help with this particular task.

“You knew,” the voice said. “And you gave him the book anyway, and when I gave you the chance to tell me the truth about the compulsion, the night Draco blurted it out, you lied to me. On purpose. Deliberately.” Harry could feel his rage rising, knew how easy it would be to kill, and knew exactly why he would kill, too. “And you used compulsion, and you used it on him.

“Do you have the slightest idea of how much he means to me?”

Snape’s face was turning black. Harry wondered why for a moment, because the hands hadn’t gripped him that long, and then reminded himself that it was the pressure and not the length of time that mattered.

His rage trembled. The magic whispered about him. It would be so easy, so easy to kill him—

But that would only bring him pain, and Harry was in enough pain already, as one of the people he had counted on being able to trust pulled back a mask to reveal a traitor’s face, and the trust itself crumbled and crazed and cracked into ruin.

He opened his hand, actually trying to make the same motion with both of them as he showed the magic what to do, and the fingers on Snape’s throat parted. Snape dropped limply to the floor, and lay there for a moment. Then Fawkes left Harry’s shoulder and soared over to him, shedding tears on his bruises. Harry knew he would live.

And the pain had overcome the rage now, and his magic was simply howling around him, the cry of a maddened, wounded beast.

“I trusted you,” he whispered, and then he turned and ran.

He burst out of the school, sobbing, having got his breath back by now. The magic made enough noise for the both of them, though, sweeping around him and rising up into towering wings as they came out from between the walls, howling steadily, the sound of a werewolf in mourning.

Harry stumbled towards the Forbidden Forest, tracing, he thought, the path he had used in second year when his magic had similarly gone out of control and was pulsing around him. He didn't make it that far, though. He fell to his knees and wept, while around him his magic swayed and sang and howled.

Something sang back.

Harry wiped frantically at his tears with his hand and lifted his head to the black sky. The moon had gone behind a cloud. Even the stars seemed dimmer. It was the darkness between the stars that pulsed and shimmered and shook, and Harry could hear the song of the Dark magic growing closer and closer, reaching eagerly out to him.

Come with us. Ride with us. What need have you to hold back now? You know the joys of unrestraint, and they will never accept you back anyway, all those creatures who live so willingly within walls and limits. Come.

Harry trembled, wrapping his arms around himself and bowing his head. He knew that he would never have to worry about hurting anyone again, not if he went into the Dark music. It might still happen, but he wouldn't care. Or he would lose his magic into the great wash of power around him, becoming one with the river, the wind, the song.

He would escape accusations of murder.

He would escape knowing that Snape had lied to him, and that he could only ever trust one person again, and that the refuge he had counted on obtaining was gone, swept away like a house in the flood.

He didn't really want to, not with the part of him that thought he should stay alive for the war and concentrate on his mistakes and making sure they never happened again. But that was not quite as strong as the part of him that longed for escape, any escape, in the wake of this latest fanged epiphany.

He felt the Dark magic land close beside him and pace towards him. Harry looked. It had the form of an enormous black wolf, with his own green eyes, marked with a bolt of silver lightning on its forehead. It

snarled at him and danced its forepaws in invitation, tilting its head back so that it could look up at the sky. Harry stood, shivering, and moved a step forward. He would never have to be cold again if he went with it, because he would forget what warmth was.

Fawkes flared into being above him, song loud and defiant. The wolf screamed as the light fell on it, and stumbled a step back, crouching as though it would leap and engulf the phoenix.

Harry gained his sanity back again for the second time that evening. Or should it be third, since he'd slipped from it twice? He thought that, and other such irrelevant things, even as he turned and ran into the Forbidden Forest.

His magic bounded beside him, puzzled but still attached to him. Fawkes soared along above him, singing. Harry could feel magical creatures who might have bothered him ordinarily drawing back from them, not willing to tangle with someone accompanied by the fiercest of both Light and Dark fury.

Then he became aware of movement off to the side, and turned his head. A three-headed snake slid there, heads all turned towards him. A Runespoor.

"Have you come to us at last?" was its excited greeting. "We told you to come back to us when you could hear the singing. We mean you to listen."

Harry caught his breath in a sob, and stopped running. He had not remembered that part of the meeting in the Forest for months, but now it blazed in his memory, hard and clear as lit notes of music. He nodded, slowly. His magic danced beside him, and looked back and forth between him and the snake.

"Follow," the Runespoor ordered briskly, and then slid into the woods. Harry followed, now and then stumbling on holes in the Forest floor. Even with the light from Fawkes's feathers, which was brighter when he actually settled onto Harry's shoulder, it was as dim under the thick branches as it had been under the lake.

He at last reached the hill where he had met the Runespoors in the autumn. They were gathered in a half-circle now, and when they saw him, they lifted their heads and hissed deeply.

“Break our web,” said the one who had led him, whipping around and looking up at Harry. All three heads hissed as one, lending the Parseltongue a slight echo effect—comparable to, but not as strong as, the rippling voices of the Many. “It was wrought of song, the Light music that we can hear but not sing. We will teach you the Dark music, the means of hearing it and yet resisting it. The Runespoors were great singers, once. With your help, we shall become so again.”

“Very well,” said Harry simply, not even sure what he was agreeing to but knowing it would keep his thoughts off the reason he had come out here, and then knelt so that he could rest his body while occupying his mind.

He could see the web almost at once, a thicker-stranded one than the Many’s, splitting into small shining threads near each Runespoor, so that it could snare all three heads on each snake—or two in the cases where the Runespoor’s other two heads had bitten the critical one off. Harry reached out and laid his magic carefully along the webs. It went along with him, seeming concerned more than sorrowful now, not sure what he was doing.

Fawkes began to sing.

Harry took a deep breath as the song was answered by a hissing croon from the Runespoors, turning to a discordant music like peas being rattled about in a drum. The two songs mingled, flowing around each other and coming in two distinct streams to his ears. One was the frenzied symphony of the Dark music he was already familiar with.

The other was strong, and bright, with an undertone of rage. The song of the Light magic, Harry supposed, and it was angry with Voldemort for tricking it, getting ready to recoil upon him.

He followed the path of Fawkes’s song. There was no other way to describe it. As the phoenix was bonded to him through their established connection and to the Light song through his voice, so

Harry could follow that three-link chain and find himself in the midst of a roaring golden river, singing as it ran to the sea, as the sun and the moon rose and turned and fell. This was the music of the spheres, Harry thought, generated by the movement of the lights of heaven. The stars sang, too, but in voices too high and cold to be of much use. It was the sun the phoenix especially sang to, and the moon could serve as another chorister, gathering the sun's light and reflecting it back.

Harry wondered how many creatures were singing in the world that he never heard.

A small golden tributary stream ran into the mighty river, and Harry located it easily, not only because it was there at all, but because it was befouled. The web stretched across it as a dam, and streaks of black curled into it. Harry wrinkled his nose. This was a corruption of Light magic. Whoever had done this had been in haste, and had simply slapped tangled webs and bits of twigs and moss together and then dropped the whole thing in the stream.

He gently scooped up the dam, and step by step began putting its materials to the side, on the bank of the stream. He could sense the web's threads around the Runespoors fracturing as he did so, and the Light music itself helped him, the stream eager to run clear and free again. Harry gathered and scooped, gathered and placed, and slowly, slowly, the swirls of black in the gold faded. The tributary chattered at him and sang like a bluebird at dawn.

As he worked with the Light music, the Runespoors touched the Dark song, he thought. They were working it into him, showing him the patterns that underlay the seeming chaos. It was the chaos that made the Dark music so hard to resist. It seemed ever-changing wildness, and as long as that was the case, then a human mind became lost in it—and intrigued by the thought of no two moments ever being the same. But there were some patterns there, some notes insistently repeated, some others coming and going with less frequency, and once he knew what they were, he could listen to the music without fear.

His wandless magic went along with it.

Harry felt the magic pursuing the knowledge of the Dark music inside him, intrigued and impressed and lulled by the thought of understanding it at last. As the Runespoors sang and taught him, chorus by chorus and verse by verse, his magic learned it, too. As Harry stooped and gathered material from the stream to place on the bank, all the while using one hand, the magic became used to the thought of doing labor with one hand and did not find it so bad. As Fawkes sang, his magic nudged at the bond between him and the phoenix, and accepted it, and curled up inside his body again like a restless cat come back home.

Harry sang and worked and learned, refusing to acknowledge the coming of the magic, until it was unmistakable. Then he opened his eyes, and found the Runespoors slithering freely around him, and Fawkes just coming down from the song on his shoulder, and his wandless magic once more bound, part of him, losing its free will in the wonder of knowing what he knew and being his magic.

“Thank you,” said the Runespoors. “Thank you. We will not attack the other humans now. We have our song back. That is all we wanted. And now you can go to sleep, little one, now that you are returned.”

Harry wanted to protest that he didn’t need to sleep—until he tried to stand up and fell over, and Fawkes bit his ear hard enough to draw blood. Then he decided that maybe he did, after all.

He curled up in the middle of the clearing, Runespoors piled warm and lazy around him, and drifted into sleep on a music like drumming peas that did not let him think about anything else that had happened to him that Midsummer night.

No matter what else happens to me, I am still vates. There is still that.

Chapter Sixty-Five: Call It Compulsion, Call It Madness

Albus frowned slightly. It seemed that his compulsion had not been as successful as he would have liked. Nightfall, and Harry had fled outside Hogwarts and was sleeping in the Forbidden Forest, as he saw when he focused his eyes through a knothole in one of the trees.

Perhaps he should be patient. After all, assert the compulsion too strongly, and Harry would be sure to feel it. He must keep the reins light and loose until he could pull Harry up and arrest him in his plunging course.

But an intuition itched behind his eyelids, telling him that he didn't have much time. Yes, he might catch Harry in a carefully constructed trap, and the boy's fight with Severus—Albus had felt the echoes of angry Dark magic all the way up in his office—suggested that it was working. Still, all the students left the school in a few days, and Harry wouldn't have an excuse to remain here if he was not staying with Severus. He would travel away, and then Albus would have, at best, the uneasy knowledge that his compulsion was working in him without knowing why or how.

No, he would have to take the chance. At least Fawkes was asleep now, and so was Harry, and it was easier to make an impression on a dreaming mind than a waking one. Albus drew in more of his gift and then exhaled it in a great, sweeping miasma over the boy resting among the Runespoors.

Harry stirred and murmured fretfully, but sank back into slumber again. Albus continued to watch. He had pushed as much as he dared. Now he had to wait and see whether his designs would be frustrated or answered, whether Harry would save the world or damn it.

He hoped he would not wait long.

Harry woke to something pecking him. He sat up slowly, assuming it was Fawkes, until he realized the phoenix sat with his head beneath his wing on a branch not far from him. Harry frowned and looked about until he noticed the pale belly of a barn owl hovering beside

him. Carefully, Harry adjusted his glasses and reached out to make his left arm a perch for the owl.

The talons scored his bare skin and drew faint lines of blood. Harry supposed he should really go inside to the hospital wing soon and have those and the other wounds treated. For now, though, he was too busy.

He unrolled the letter, slowly and clumsily, and grimaced when he recognized the handwriting.

I will not bother with greetings. We cannot afford the time, and you would think it insincere of me anyway.

My old siblings are not helpless without my lord. They are going to cut off the head of the serpent, and watch the body thrash in helpless convulsions. Do you want to come and protect the snake, or hear of it later? I would be most pleased to bring you a personal report from the Ministry. I am going in early to watch the fun. Do let me know if you want to come with me. I know two areas free of anti-Apparition wards.

Still playing the game,

Evan Rosier.

Harry rubbed his face with the letter and tried to get rid of sleepiness and the sickness that wanted to assault him as he remembered Snape's betrayal. It was still hours from dawn, by the position of the moon. He hadn't slept long. He didn't want to waste time figuring out riddles handed to him by a Death Eater who was probably mad anyway.

But something about the wording lingered in his brain, tickling it. This was a wizarding proverb, not one of Rosier's poetry quotes.

In a moment, he remembered. There had once been a plot to assassinate a Slytherin Headmaster of Hogwarts that used the same words. In the end, the assassins had had to give up their plan

because they couldn't get close enough to the Headmaster through the walls of the wards.

Cut off the head of the serpent, and watch the body thrash...

Harry's eyes popped wide, and he heard a gasp rip from his throat. He shook out the letter again and stared at it.

Yes. Rosier did mention the Ministry.

Scrimgeour. They're going for Scrimgeour.

Harry stood, sending the barn owl into flight with an irritated hoot, his mind scrambling around his skull. Somehow, he had thought the Death Eaters wouldn't want to move while Voldemort was still in hiding and healing, which was stupid. Of course they could have had plans that he'd directed them to put into practice even before his resurrection. And of course someone like Karkaroff was clever enough and high enough in standing with the Death Eaters to force them into motion, even if the others wanted to wait.

They want to assassinate the Minister. Of course they do. What a bold move, what a statement of power! And the country would thrash around like a snake with its head cut off.

Harry tossed the letter hastily to the ground, struggled away from the last of the Runespoors, and began running through the Forest towards the limit of the wards. Even now, he would not try to Apparate within them, lest he tear some of the most-needed protections against Voldemort. But he could Apparate from outside them, and that would get him to the Ministry in time to warn Scrimgeour. Harry thought he could remember the gray room where the Hounds had brought him. That had been free of anti-Apparition wards, though they might have been put back up by now with the disbanding of the Hounds.

So be it, then. Now that he had control of his magic back, Harry thought he could survive even a bounce from wards like that without splinching.

Probably.

He pushed away the small snarl of uneasiness in the back of his mind. He would preserve his life, oh yes, he had to, because this was for the war, and he had to answer the training his mother had given him. But he would preserve other lives, too. He had failed tests in the graveyard, and even before then. He hadn't figured out that it was Karkaroff who must have downed the Aurors and blocked up the Floo Network the night of the raid on the Ministry prison, even though he should have. He hadn't kept Sirius alive, even though he should have.

He was not about to let Scrimgeour die.

He reached the outer limit of the wards and slowed his run abruptly as he noticed someone standing in the light of a Lumos glow. He stared when he recognized the dark eyes and the mad grin. Evan Rosier bowed to him.

"You are taking me up on the offer of Apparating to the Ministry after all?" he called cheerfully.

Harry bared his teeth, unable to help it. His determination was surging along the edge of rage, and the sight of a Death Eater now called up memories of just a few hours ago that he would much rather avoid. "Not on your life. I'm going, but I'm going to Apparate to an area that I know of."

Rosier laughed at him. "I didn't mean that you should actually come with me, Harry—may I call you Harry?"

"No," said Harry curtly, and closed his eyes, trying to remember the exact size and shape and color of that bare little room.

"I would just give you the description of the room, and then you could Apparate there yourself," Rosier continued smoothly, interrupting Harry's memories. "One of them is a little-used room off a private office of the Minister's. It has four close gray walls, and a table that's bolted to the floor in the middle of it and can't go anywhere. The smell is that of blood, from when they cut into a unicorn in there one time and couldn't get rid of the reek. Can you see it?"

Yes, Harry could, far more clearly than the ten-month-old memory he'd been trying to call up. For a moment, he weighed whether he could trust Rosier against the need to get to the Ministry on time.

His mother's voice whispered in his head, chasing away all doubts. You will sometimes have to make allies of your enemies. You can trust them to act in their own self-interest, as long as you know what they want. When their goals and yours no longer coincide, then you may drop them. There is no shame in doing so. They are evil if they would oppose your brother, and have no sense of honor to lose.

Harry nodded, once, and then, holding the image of the room clear before his eyes, he Apparated.

It felt as though someone had shoved him down a tube and were slowly squeezing him out. Harry had Apparated before, and even from London to Scotland, but then, he'd known both the place he left and the place he arrived in very well, and he'd had rage at Dumbledore driving him. Now he was aiming for a place he didn't know very well, and he could almost feel the magic tumbling through space beside him, anxiously seeking a way for him to land safely, seeking a room that matched the description in his head.

Then it was there. The stink of unicorn blood wrongfully spilled, familiar from the Forbidden Forest in first year, hit his nose, and Harry opened his eyes to find himself in the room Rosier had described. He'd landed just a few inches from the table. He moved towards the door at once, even as he heard a pop from behind him that was probably Rosier. Harry ignored him. He would harm the man if he attacked, and if he did not, then Harry saw no reason to encourage him or pay attention to him.

"Oh, good," said Rosier. "No one else is here. I hoped that no one else would be. They must be using the other one."

Harry knew, distantly, that he should have flinched or had some reaction to the information that the Death Eaters could have been here. He didn't, not really. Even the thought of seeing Bellatrix barely

infuriated him. He was busy casting the reverse to the locking charms on the door, and then stepping out into the office beyond.

It was well-lit, and when Harry moved up to the padded chair behind the desk and touched it, it was still warm. Of course, Scrimgeour must have been working late, he thought, or the Death Eaters would have aimed for his home, wherever it was.

He turned and looked at Rosier. "What else do you know about this plan?"

Rosier lifted a shoulder with a faint smile. "Only that a spy was supposed to lure the Minister out of his office, Harry. Something about wanting to expose a few more Death Eaters pretending to be loyal Ministry officials, like Walden Macnair, to him." Rosier chuckled. "Oh, he's going to meet Death Eaters, I suppose. Just not the ones he expects."

"Where was the other place we could have Apparated in?" Harry demanded, thinking it reasonable that the traitor would walk Scrimgeour in that direction.

"One of the offices on the second floor, which Walden secured for us bit by bit," said Rosier. "This particular office is on the third."

Harry ran for the door again. He could feel the hum of wards around them, and the very least the wards would do is prevent Apparating. He suspected that a few of them were already calling alarms about unwanted intruders in this office. Once again, it wasn't something he had time to stop and worry about.

He found an empty corridor, decorated with sleeping portraits, beyond the office, but even as he began walking down it, a figure stepped out of a door to his left. Harry gripped his wand and spun into a battle-crouch, almost flinging a hex before he realized it was Tonks.

She stared at him, her hair changing from blue to pink. "Harry?" she asked. "What are you doing here?"

“Hello, sweet girl,” said Evan Rosier from behind her. “I bet you taste like blueberries.”

Harry flung a body-bind at Rosier, yelled at Tonks, “He’s a Death Eater, extremely dangerous, leave him alone,” and then ran up the corridor, looking for some sign of a staircase or the lifts. He knew he should be able to remember—his mother would have been so disappointed in him that he could not—but his mind was blurring and racing, and Ministry geography was the last thing on it right now.

At last, the hallway ended in a door that opened on stairs leading up. Harry ran up them. The only sounds, bounced back from the walls, were his own footsteps and labored breathing. Dimly, he was aware that the wound Voldemort had given him had torn open again.

Stubborn thing, he thought, and opened the door at the top of the next flight of stairs, sure that he had found the second floor.

Sounds of fighting at once worried and reassured him, and he hurtled forward, running possible battle arrangements over in his head, trying to calculate how many Death Eaters were likely to be there, and telling himself over and over that the sounds meant Scrimgeour was not yet down and dead.

He turned a sharp bend, and came out into the mass of Auror desks that he remembered from his visits to Scrimgeour when the man was still the Head of the Auror Office. Hexes and curses fizzled steadily from the middle of it towards the right side, where Harry could see a small group of frazzled Aurors making a valiant stand.

Among the Death Eaters attacking them were Fenrir Greyback, Walden Macnair, Karkaroff, and a few other heavyset men Harry didn’t recognize. A seventh man lay motionless on the floor not far from them. Harry didn’t have time to see whether it was a Death Eater or an Auror.

What he cared about was that the attackers were a good distance from the defenders—one of the Aurors had raised a ward that, while it couldn’t deflect all the hexes, was forcing the Death Eaters to remain a dozen feet away—and they had shelter from their desks, as well.

No matter what spells Harry chose for this fight, they were unlikely to hurt Scrimgeour or his allies.

His magic snarled in happiness, or maybe that was him. Harry moved forward and aimed his wand.

“Exsculpo!” he hissed, this time using a different intonation than the one he’d used on Voldemort. The spell surged through him and out, still unfamiliar and exciting for its very unfamiliarity.

The purple light hit one of the unfamiliar Death Eaters in the leg, and the leg abruptly ceased to exist. He cried out and listed to the side, then fell hard and knocked his head on one of the desks. He was out, Harry thought, at least for now.

Karkaroff whipped around and saw him. The man’s eyes narrowed at once, and he snapped, “Greyback. Avery. Macnair. Take him. I’ll kill the Minister.” He turned again to face Scrimgeour, while the other three began blasting desks aside to get to Harry faster.

Harry took a brief moment to survey the Aurors. Two of them were wounded, but the others looked well. Scrimgeour, in particular, was still hearty, and Harry could see his yellow eyes lock onto Karkaroff’s as if he could sense the strongest Dark magic there.

Then Harry had other things to worry about, because the lead Death Eater—who was a stranger, so he must be Avery—was almost on him, calling up a Blasting Curse that would probably hurt Harry if it hit.

If it hit.

Harry rolled to the side and under one of the desks. He was just small enough to make it, and he knew he was lucky that the desks were hollow underneath. He curled up tight and heard Greyback snarl and Macnair answer some question Avery had asked with a curse. Apparently, they had lost track of him for at least one precious moment.

Harry smiled, and knew it was a feral smile.

Always use what's around you. That's what she taught me.

He gestured with his right hand in the direction of the desk, and intoned a nonverbal Levitation Charm. The desk rose in the air, rotating slowly. Avery let out a triumphant yell as he caught sight of him.

Harry winked, smiled, and then flung the desk at them as hard as he could.

Greyback ducked out of the way with all the agility of a werewolf, and Macnair raised a Shield Charm that would keep out heavier weights than a desk. Avery, stunned and already stepping towards Harry, wasn't so lucky. The desk hit him in the face and body, and blew him backward, sending him spinning into the wall. Harry pulled up the desk so that it didn't crush his legs, turned it, and this time threw it at the back of Karkaroff's head.

Macnair had caught on to what he was doing, though. He cried out, "Wingardium Leviosa!" and seized control of the desk. Then he sent it flying back at Harry.

Harry's own Shield Charm bounced the desk off quite handily, and it hit one of the others hard enough to snap its legs. Harry stood, glancing down. Papers had spilled out of the desk, hardly sharp missiles, but able to be used as distractions if he picked them up with magic and flurried them around the room—

Then he caught sight of Fenrir Greyback, crouched in the aisle next to him and snarling. He was already rising to his feet, and Harry moved to pour strength into his Shield Charm. There weren't many spells that would affect a werewolf, even in human form, and he would need the moment to think of one.

"Here, puppy, puppy, puppy!" sang a voice from the back of the room.

Harry stared even as Greyback spun around. Rosier stood near the door, swinging his wand in his hand and clucking his tongue.

“Does poor lost little puppy want a treat?” he asked, and held up what Harry thought was a sweet shaped like a bone.

Rosier knew his opponent. Greyback howled in utter fury, sprang up onto the nearest desk, and dived at Rosier. Rosier sprang aside, laughing, and set Greyback on fire.

Harry turned around, thinking that no matter who won the fight, it could only be better for his side. He scanned quickly for Macnair, using his magic to lift up the papers—

And saw that Macnair had stepped around to the side, angling to get within reach of the ward protecting the Aurors. Karkaroff was still in front of them, exchanging spells with Scrimgeour. The Minister had fallen fully into the duel, and Harry doubted that he was noticing Macnair. His Aurors were watching him.

Harry shouted a warning, but his voice went unheard in the noise of Macnair intoning, “Sanguinolentus!”

The Bloody Cut Curse was a red, hissing, spluttering thing. Harry saw it take flight from the end of Macnair’s wand and aim straight for Scrimgeour’s shoulder like an evil star. Harry flung out a hand and tried to take control of and turn the curse the way he had seen Voldemort do, but he suspected he had failed, or did not yet know the skill, when it did not even wobble in its path.

Scrimgeour was going to die.

And then someone dived between him and the curse and took it on his own shoulder. He went down fast, bleeding ferociously, but not before Harry had time to see that his hair was red.

Percy.

Macnair let out a wordless shout of frustration, Harry one that echoed it, and Scrimgeour a battle cry. He forced Karkaroff back with a Blasting Curse aimed at the floor under his feet, spun on his bad leg, crouched over Percy, and aimed his wand at Macnair. Harry could

see the longing to kill burning in his eyes. With one of his staff bleeding to death, it would have been so easy.

Instead, he remained an Auror, and the only spell he took Macnair down with was, "Petrificus Totalus!"

Macnair collapsed. Harry turned sharply to deal with Karkaroff, but he was already running. Greyback and Rosier were gone from sight, and the last unfamiliar Death Eater who had come with Karkaroff lay still beside the one whose leg Harry had taken, bleeding from a head wound.

"Feverfew, Mallory, get him," said Scrimgeour, efficient as always, and then knelt down beside Percy.

Harry hurried towards them, ignoring the looks that Aurors Feverfew and Mallory gave him as they ran past. They might think it strange to see him here, and perhaps even stranger that he wouldn't hunt beside them, but Harry knew his duty. Karkaroff was only one capture, in the end.

Percy's life was more important.

Harry stepped around the desk and crouched down beside Scrimgeour. The Minister, his face pale and utterly devoid of all emotion, was pressing furiously on the cut in Percy's shoulder, trying to stop the blood. It wasn't working. That was impossible, Harry knew, with Sanguinolentus. The wound simply kept bleeding, resisting any pressure or clotting, until the patient died.

It resisted most healing magic, too, and Harry knew only the most basic medical spells. But he had something else he thought might work.

He closed his eyes. Fawkes? He tried to summon the phoenix for the first time. Fawkes, I need you now!

The phoenix popped into being above him, with a startled squawk, as though Harry had woken him out of a sound sleep. But he fluttered

down to Harry's arm when Harry held it out for him, and saw the situation at a glance.

Tears welled up in his dark eyes, and fell on the wound, Scrimgeour pulling back his hands in silence so they wouldn't obstruct the way. Harry held his breath for a moment, and then closed his eyes as he realized the bleeding had begun to ease off. The Bloody Cut Curse had come very near costing Percy his arm, but it would heal, if slowly, under the phoenix's tears. Percy would have to spend some time in the Ministry's infirmary or St. Mungo's for blood loss, but that was so much better than what it could have been.

Harry felt Scrimgeour touch his shoulder. He blinked his eyes open, and looked at the Minister.

"You're wounded, too," said Scrimgeour, without any particular emphasis, his eyes on Harry's chest.

Harry blinked and looked down. His robes had fallen open, and his shirt underneath it was soaked with blood. He tugged the cloth slowly away from the gaping bite, and winced when he realized that the edges of it had turned black and begun to stink. Some poison that Voldemort carried in his teeth, probably.

He remembered, abruptly, that Fawkes had cried on the wound earlier, and though it had closed and almost ceased to ache, it had not healed.

"What curse did that?" Scrimgeour asked, dividing his attention between Harry and Percy. Fawkes's tears were coming more slowly now. Scrimgeour wiped the blood away from the cut, revealing a long, wicked scar that ran like a rope around Percy's upper arm. His eyes held plenty of emotions now, hope and pride and fear, as he stared at the young man who had nearly died saving his life. Harry glanced politely to the side, to let them have their private moment, as he answered.

"No curse. Voldemort bit me."

He looked back to see that Scrimgeour had jumped as if jolted by lightning, and so had the Aurors who remained with him behind the desks. Harry rolled his eyes. It's just a name. What I have to tell them next is what should really shock them—or maybe not, since they just survived an attack by Death Eaters.

“Voldemort has returned,” he said quietly. “He resurrected himself in a dark Midsummer ritual—“

“There are no dark Midsummer rituals,” interrupted one of the taller Aurors. She looked as though she were spoiling for a fight.

Harry rolled his eyes at her. “A corrupted Midsummer ritual then, I should have said.” He could feel his breath coming faster, but he refused to let it. He would not permit his emotions to take him over and make him react like a child in front of the Minister. The dryness he could put into his tone did counteract them, somewhat. “I was under such temptation to notice semantics at the time, since I was tied to an altar in the middle of a graveyard.”

“Go on.” Scrimgeour's eyes were narrow, and drinking in light and information. The eyes, Harry thought, of a man preparing for war.

Harry described the ritual as concisely as he could, telling all the details of Voldemort's plans, and the fact that he was incapacitated due to memory loss for right now, but that that couldn't last for long. In the middle of his story, Aurors Feverfew and Mallory returned, with Tonks beside them, to report they had lost Karkaroff, and there had been no sign of Rosier or Greyback. Avery, Macnair, and the two heavysset Death Eaters were their only captures, since the traitorous Ministry official who had led Scrimgeour here had died in the first round of curses.

Harry warned them about the two unwarded rooms.

“I will take care of it,” said Scrimgeour.

Looking at him, Harry thought he could almost relax. Yes, he will. I am proud to have such a man on my side as we go into war against

Voldemort. Even thinking about how Fudge would have mishandled things made him want to shudder.

Percy chose that moment to groan and open his eyes, and the look on his face when he realized that both he and Scrimgeour were still alive completed Harry's contentment.

There's such courage, such goodness, in the most unexpected places, he thought, watching the moment that he was sure had just completed whatever silent test Scrimgeour had been making of Percy. That's the thing to remember as we go into this war. That's the thing that will lead us back to peace.

He ignored, as best he could, the fact that Fawkes had wept on his bite wound and only managed to close it again, not ease the blackness or the stink of it.

Harry trudged wearily towards the castle for the second time that night, Fawkes perched heavily on his shoulder. At least he had no dead body floating behind him this time, Harry thought. He supposed that was an improvement.

He rounded the last bend in the path, and Snape was waiting for him.

Harry snarled. His magic boiled around him for a moment, before he calmed it down. He wouldn't try to confine it to his body this time, and it was in no danger of wildly attacking people as it had been, but he still didn't want to choke or burn or fling Snape into a wall. The man had betrayed him. That meant he didn't deserve even that much of Harry's notice.

He made to walk around him, but Snape said, as if he had a right to demonstrate his concern, "Where have you been?"

Harry ignored him, and only stepped further to the side. Snape stood motionless. Harry took that to mean he wouldn't touch him, and thus was taken completely by surprise when Snape sniffed once, then reached down and wrenched his robes and shirt—which was stiff with dried blood—to the side.

“What is this?” Snape whispered, staring at the bite wound.

“None of your business.” Harry ducked his head and pulled sharply away. “Go back to sleep, why don’t you, Snape? You can hear all about it in the morning, as much as Madam Pomfrey ever tells anyone about someone else’s wounds. I’m going to her. Good night, Snape,” he added, when Snape didn’t move.

“Where were you?” he demanded again.

“You. Can’t. Know.” Perhaps he is feeling a bit thick-headed after all the loss of air to his brain when I choked him, and needs that reminder.

“I would like to know.” That was Draco’s voice, and he had appeared behind Snape, a Lumos-lighted wand of his own in his hand, competing with the dawn’s faint radiance in the east. Something was wrong, though, because his face was tight and pale, and his voice was hoarse with fury. Harry raised his eyebrows. He’s angry with me? Why? Surely Snape told him why I ran away earlier, and I’m back safe now.

“I went to the Ministry,” said Harry. “I received warning that the Death Eaters were trying to assassinate the Minister. I went to help stop them.”

“Where did you get this warning?” Draco stepped closer and closer, and Harry stifled the temptation to back up. He knew he hadn’t done something wrong. How could he have? He’d risked his life to help save someone else’s, and though in the end he wasn’t the one who’d taken the Sanguinolentus curse, his aid had made a difference in the fight, and he’d got the chance to tell Scrimgeour about the Dark Lord’s return. Harry considered that a win-win situation.

“Rosier sent me a letter—“

“You trusted the word of a Death Eater?” Draco was yelling now, from only a few feet away, and that was disconcerting as hell, because Harry still couldn’t figure out what he’d done wrong. “Harry, why in the name of Merlin didn’t you come back and get me? Get McGonagall?”

Get Dumbledore, for that matter? Why didn't you raise the alarm, instead of running straight into what could have been a trap?"

"But it wasn't a trap," said Harry.

"You trust Rosier, then?" Draco looked as if he were going to tell him how foolish he was, if he said yes.

"Of course not," said Harry. "But he offered to tell me about one of two rooms in the Ministry that weren't warded against Apparition, and I—"

"You do realize that they would have been Apparition points known to Death Eaters?" Snape had the gall to step into the argument, his face gone so pale that he looked almost sick. Harry stared at him in scorn under which he'd forced the pain. What does he want? He doesn't care about me, he's made that obvious, and I don't think he'd have any other reason for sticking his big nose in.

"I knew that," Harry snapped. "But when it was a choice of save the Minister's life or dither around—"

"You could have been killed," said Draco, and seized his left wrist in a silent reminder of what else could have happened to him if the Death Eaters had taken him. "Merlin, Harry, don't you ever think?" The anger was gone out of his voice, but left in it was a cold disappointment that hurt worse. "Getting kidnapped isn't your fault, I know that, but you willingly went out of your way to put your life in danger again tonight. And now there's this." He nodded towards the bite wound at the juncture of Harry's neck and shoulder. "You didn't go see Madam Pomfrey at all this evening." He checked the light in the east. "Last night."

"I was a bit busy," Harry said.

"Doing what?" Draco leaned towards his face. "Do you know how frantic I was? Searching every room in the castle, worrying when I could feel you and then suddenly not feel you—"

“Freeing Runespoors,” said Harry, so that he could concentrate on answering the question and not on what he’d done to Draco.

Draco closed his eyes. “Harry,” he said. “Merlin. No one’s asking you to start fighting the war tonight.”

“But the first strike of the war came tonight,” said Harry. He was trying to understand, really he was, but their concerns seemed so far away from his. Yes, he knew he had hurt Draco, and he hadn’t wanted that to happen. But Draco was speaking as if Harry could really have taken the time to run back to the castle and talk with him—and Harry knew Draco wouldn’t have let him go to the Ministry if that had happened, any more than McGonagall and Snape had the night of Rosier and Greyback’s raid on the jail. Didn’t Draco see that everything was different now that Voldemort had come back, that Harry had to fight his evil when and where it appeared? “I didn’t plan that, either.”

Draco startled him by wrapping an arm around his shoulders, and bending his face close to him to whisper in his ear.

“Harry, you’re wounded and exhausted, and you haven’t even taken the time to cry over Dragonsbane, I don’t think, and you’ve had a fight with Snape. You have to get some rest, or you’re going to break down.” Draco hesitated for a moment, then added, “I think you might actually need the breakdown, but I know that you don’t think it can happen right now or right here. Come back to the Manor with me this summer. I’ve been doing some thinking, and I don’t really believe my father would turn his back on you.”

“Yes, he would.” That was another certainty that Harry felt drawn to, even though it had emerged from inside his head like an iceberg coming out of the fog. “I just don’t want to risk it, Draco. Please.”

Draco shook his head slowly. “Your second best option was Snape, and now he’s not an option anymore. What else are you going to do for the summer, Harry?”

“I don’t know.” Harry tugged against the arm which held him. “I’ll decide later. I promise. I’ll decide later.” He could feel tears gathering

behind his eyelids, and they alarmed him, when he'd been feeling so calm and confident half an hour ago. Probably Draco was right, and he did need some time and place to recover from the storm. But he didn't think, at least at the moment, that he could bear the intimacy of spending eight weeks with Draco. If nothing else, he would begin feeling insanely guilty every time he had to run or Apparate into battle and didn't take Draco along—and then he would feel insanely fearful that Draco, who had his empathy, would take too many wounds of one kind or another in the fighting. There had to be a solution that wasn't the Sanctuary and wasn't Malfoy Manor and wasn't Snape, but Harry didn't know what it was, yet.

Draco sighed at him. "I'm walking you to the hospital wing," he said. "And then I'm staying with you. It's not like we have classes tomorrow."

He turned to guide Harry up the path. Snape fell into step on the other side of them. When they were only a few paces from the doors into the entrance hall, Snape cleared his throat and said, "Harry—"

"Don't." Harry refused to look at him. "I have nothing to say to you." Harry was tired.

He was tired, but he didn't want to sleep. He lay on a bed in the hospital wing, staring at the ceiling. He'd kept his eyes closed long enough to fool Madam Pomfrey, who'd applied several antivenin spells to his wound, exclaiming in shocked tones about its state all the while, and considered giving him Dreamless Sleep, until Harry convinced her he'd already tumbled into slumber on his own. Draco had remained with him, as promised, but he hadn't had much rest, either. It hadn't taken long for him to let his head droop on his crossed arms and fall asleep in the chair next to Harry's bed.

Meanwhile, Harry's mind raced busily along a track of thoughts that seemed to emerge from that selfsame fog in his head, but be clear and distinct.

They won't stop pushing at me. Snape is acting like I'll forgive him. If I stay at Hogwarts, I even might, because that's how weak I am, and he'd always be interfering when I needed to do something for the war.

Narcissa will push, too, and Draco, if I go to Malfoy Manor. I don't care what he says about Lucius. At the very least, he'll probably think the loss of a hand disfigures me. Harry shifted his severed wrist carefully to the side. He hadn't shown it to Madam Pomfrey, either, to Draco's palpable displeasure. As understanding as he said he was of Harry's desire to hide the wound, it was obvious that he thought it would be better if Harry told someone else. Harry thought he might yield, too, if Draco kept up the pushing in his moments of emotional collapse. And that would be disastrous, with some of his other allies as well as Lucius. There were old pureblood prejudices among the Dark families about the ugly, the disfigured, the broken. Wizards with a false leg and eye like Moody's, or a limp like Scrimgeour's, were welcome—among the Light. The Dark purebloods often liked to pretend that such casualties never happened to them, the same way they liked to pretend that divorces and second marriages and powerful Muggleborn witches and wizards never happened.

And I can't go to the Sanctuary, whatever Fawkes thinks, Harry concluded. They'd push me, too, and they really wouldn't let me leave if I wanted. I'm not even sure that I could, if what Peter said about shadows and illusions around the Sanctuary is true. And it would take news forever to reach me. I can't be that far away from the rest of the wizarding world right now.

He needed a place where he could collapse and work his way back up. That much was obvious. He also needed a place where people wouldn't push at him to speed up the collapse, and wouldn't push at him to prolong it, and where he could go forth to battle when he received a vision or a warning from his allies. He needed, in fact, a place where the people around him were blind to him, and what he really was.

His body stiffened, and his breathing grew rapid.

Lily.

The thought seemed mad at first, but when he tried to chase it away, it circled back, and hovered in the front of his mind, and demanded that it be considered.

She doesn't know me. She's blind to me. The Maze told me that. She wouldn't see anything I didn't want her to. She's never going to notice that my left hand is missing. She wouldn't notice my emotional collapses, either. I could appear before her in tears, and she wouldn't care. She'd probably urge me to dry them up and participate in battles like the guardian I was raised to be, in fact.

The more Harry thought about it, the more reasons he seemed to see, the fog peeling away from them as they crowded into his head thick and fast.

When I went into battle, she wouldn't try to hold me back. I understand why Draco got worried, really I do, but I also didn't realize he would have wanted me to come to him about this. And he would insist on either both of us going into battle, or neither. If he gets killed...

He had to stop thinking for a moment. The tremor that racked his body at the mere thought would have broken him otherwise.

I can't risk that.

And there's another thing, another advantage that I wouldn't have anywhere else. I need to recover my strength and my confidence. I failed too many tests in the graveyard. I have to find some I can pass. Lily would set me tests that I already know I can pass, because I've resisted her attempts to break me before.

His mind churned and shifted, and briefly seemed to turn upside down. Was he mad, to be considering this? What kind of idiot was he? He should go to Malfoy Manor with Draco. What prestige he stood to lose in Lucius's eyes was nothing compared to the damage his mother might do to him—

And then the fog rushed back, or, rather, peeled back from more thoughts, and Harry shook his head.

Not mad, though the rest of them will think it. I need a rest period with someone who doesn't care about me, who's blind to what I really am, and the Maze reassured me she was both those things. And she's the only possible candidate. If I went to the Garden or to Blackstone or the homes of any of my other allies, I might not get the same level of caring I would at Malfoy Manor, but I would get pushed. And Snape could invoke his legal guardianship to get me back from them, if he really tried. On the other hand, if I said that I was going back to my parents of my own free will, then he couldn't do anything.

And then he remembered another fact that made the whole thing perfect.

James still loves Lily. That means that he'd support me, if I told him that I really did want to reconcile with her. He'd like to have both his wife and his son in the same house. I saw that on the beach yesterday morning. For a moment, Harry felt incredibly old, and weary, and changed, that all this had happened in only a day, and then the sunlight of certainty came back. With both of my parents backing me, Snape wouldn't stand a chance, legal guardian or not, and Draco promised not to hurt both of them or talk to anyone else about what they said, so he couldn't oppose me, either.

Harry nodded, the course consolidating itself in his head. It would seem like madness to many—it had seemed like madness to him only a moment ago, a foreign presence in his head—but now he saw his way clear. He would do this in order to recover, in order to have an eight-week period of time to come to terms with what had happened without anyone else pushing and pulling at him.

He created an illusion of himself to lie in bed and slipped off in search of parchment and ink. He had two letters to write.

In his office, Albus toasted the fire, and the air, and himself.

It had been an incredibly difficult dance, and worn on him badly, to struggle with the boy's will, but the mist had slipped in through the cracks in Harry's emotional exhaustion and uncertainty. The compulsion had worked.

Chapter Sixty-Six: Harry and Lily

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry jumped. Of all the people he'd expected to catch him halfway to the hospital wing—his letters safely written and sent to his parents—McGonagall hadn't been one of them. He turned and looked up at her, checking automatically that the glamour of his left hand was still in place.

“Professor,” he told her, inclining his head. “Is there something wrong?”

“Yes,” said McGonagall. For some reason, Harry hadn't appreciated quite how severe she could look before this moment. Her glare was still not as icy as Snape's, but it contained a deeply personal disappointment that made Harry fight the urge to squirm. He knew he was doing the best, the only, thing he could do. That would have to content him against the disappointments of those who thought they knew a better way. “You know very well that Madam Pomfrey did not want you to leave the hospital wing before several days had passed.”

Harry blinked. That hadn't been something Madam Pomfrey had said herself, though, to be fair, he might have missed it in the rush of information she muttered last night. And he was feeling rather light-headed from lack of sleep, too, which could explain it.

“I'm doing well, Professor,” he said, and gave her a smile he knew he needed no glamour to disguise. He had been far more at peace since he made his decision.

“You are not,” said McGonagall. “Mr. Potter, you forget I am an Animagus.” Her eyes narrowed down at him. Harry wondered if she had that look in front of a rathole. “I can smell something stinking on you that should not be.” She reached out, and made almost the same gesture that Snape had, prying aside his robe and shirt to study the bite wound.

Harry looked down, ready to explain the smell as something Madam Pomfrey had rubbed on him. He did have to stare when he saw the

blackness creeping back around the edges of the wound, though. So far as he knew, that shouldn't have happened. The antivenin spells were supposed to take for anything short of a nundu's breath.

"Come with me, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall, and grabbed his left arm, luckily above the glamour. Harry really would have to get used to telling when other people were about to do that, he thought, and adjusting his own position accordingly. "Since you cannot be trusted to take care of yourself, I will escort you back to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry knew it would be no good protesting, so he went along quietly. Besides, the letters were sent. He had made arrangements that would allow him to recover his balance. Dealing with an irritated professor was nothing, compared either to what he had faced last night or what he would deal with once he saw Lily again.

A tremor ran through his frame, and Harry realized he was afraid.

Well, I was afraid with Voldemort, too, and I failed the tests. This time, I just have to be sure that I pass.

McGonagall was as good as her word, marching him straight back to his bed. The illusion of himself had dissipated, but there was no need for it, Harry saw; Draco hadn't awakened. He must have been too deeply asleep for his empathy to rouse him when Harry moved. Besides, the empathy would have reported only happy emotions to him, worry succeeded by calmness.

That is the way to fool him, Harry thought, as he let McGonagall arrange him on his pillows and call for Madam Pomfrey. Just show him my true emotions. He's not going to know until too late that I'm not happy about going to Malfoy Manor, but happy about going home.

Home.

The word sounded wonderful, and it had settled into his mind with indelible weight. Of course he should be happy to be going home. His mind still did give odd jerks and twitches, during which he thought himself mad, but he recognized madness from his touch of it in the duel with Voldemort, now. He was sure that he was sane. He was

sure that he was taking the best steps he could. Nothing but desperate need would have induced him to summon his mother in the first place, so that must obviously mean that desperate need was working now, and he really needed her.

Madam Pomfrey came bustling out, a smile lighting her face, but it died when she saw Harry's wound. She pointed her wand at it, and let out a sharp breath when a black, swirling mist soared up from it.

"What is that?" demanded McGonagall, squinting at the cloud. Harry was grateful that she asked. He didn't want to go about drawing extra attention to himself right now. He kept his hand folded and his eyes on his hand, his breathing sonorous and as deep as he could force it to be.

"The bite's infected with a changeable venom," Madam Pomfrey said, her voice taking on an almost detached tone at first, but speeding up as she grew more and more worried. "It was poison at first, but now it's become a Dark Arts curse. And I suspect that if I counter the curse, the bite will attain another poison, a different kind this time. And with each counter, the spread of the infection becomes faster."

She looked sternly at Harry. "I've got some books on changeable venoms, but it's been a long time since I looked at them," she said. "For now, since the curse is only having the same slow effect as the original poison, I'll leave it be. I'll need at least a day to look at the books before I try to heal you permanently, and then you'll need to rest here for at least four days. In the meantime, Mr. Potter, stay in bed. Your own magic levels become prey for the curse as it advances, unless you can manage to sleep and restore them." Her eyes grew even sterner then, as though she suspected Harry had gone elsewhere that morning, but she turned and went into the back part of the hospital wing.

"I'll bring you and Mr. Malfoy food and something to drink, Harry," said McGonagall softly, bending over him. "So that you don't need to leave the hospital wing for any reason." Her glare was still worse than Madam Pomfrey's, but when Harry kept mute about any possible explanation for his being out of bed, she turned and stalked away with feline dignity.

All the noise had awakened Draco, as Harry had suspected would probably happen, though he fortunately didn't appear to have heard anything about changeable venoms. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes, then frowned at Harry. "You were out of bed this morning?"

Harry looked carefully away from him, and smoothed his emotions into serenity and happiness. Draco was not going to find out anything from his empathy, if Harry could help it, but he might be able to figure out that something was wrong from Harry's actions.

"I was," Harry admitted. "I had to think, and I had to come to some conclusions." He smiled at Draco, allowing himself to take joy in his friend's expression of cautious relief. Harry really did want Draco to be all right with where he would stay for the summer, and not angry at him any more for venturing to the Ministry. He had the five days he'd stay in the hospital wing to soften him, at least. "I came to them, and, well, I'm not as upset as I was."

"Good," Draco whispered, deliberately taking hold of his left wrist. "That's good." He hesitated a long moment, then said, "Harry, we do have to talk about what you did wrong in going to the Ministry last night."

Harry sighed. "You really did want me to come and get you, then?"

"How could you even think I was joking about that?" Draco sounded something between hurt and furious. "Of course, Harry. Always, always, always. I was hunting frantically for you, and you'd just been through hell." He paused again, then said, "You've said more than once that you feel like you're taking too much from me. Well, if you keep doing things like run off to the Ministry and endanger your life recklessly, that might be true."

Harry instinctively tried to move away from him. Draco countered the motion, leaning back in his chair and staring at Harry until Harry had no choice but to glance at him. Draco looked at least as grim and determined as he had the day he convinced Harry that he loved him, the day he freed the unicorns.

"I won't say I can't live like this," said Draco, "because that's obviously not true. I'm still alive when you get back from your mad expeditions. But I don't want to live like this. It's not fair to me, Harry, and there's no reason for it, not when you can come tell me the reason for your running off and we can figure out a plan together." He chewed on his lips, then said, "You're not the only one who worries about sounding strange. I think I sound strange. But this is the only way I know how to talk about this." He covered Harry's stump carefully with his own hand. "I haven't done anything like this so far, because I know that you don't want to be forced, but if you keep endangering your life recklessly, then I will force you to stay put, Harry."

Shit. There's no way that he would understand if I talked to him about wanting to go home for the summer. I'll have to hide.

Harry lowered his head. "You wouldn't put compulsions on me, would you?" he asked.

"No," said Draco. "And I won't break any of the promises that I made you, such as not speaking ill about your mother. But anything else is fair game, Harry. Sleeping potions, body-binds, glamours—lying to you if I have to. I won't allow this to go on. I think you should have the choice to do the right thing of your own free will, which is why I'm telling you this at all. Otherwise, I'll just hit you with Consopio or a bit of Dreamless Sleep in your food the next time I think you're doing something stupid, and when you next wake up, it'll be in Malfoy Manor." He leaned closer to Harry. "Without the glamour," he added.

Harry swallowed. I'll have to be more careful than I thought. Not only will he not let me go if I tell him the truth, but I have to make sure he doesn't even suspect that something is off.

Well, better I give him a carefully worded promise now than suffer later.

"All right, Draco," he whispered. "I—you win."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Just like that? Somehow, Harry, I don't think that you've just sworn off all impulsive and stupid heroic action with a few words," he drawled.

Harry shook his head. "No. But I know what you want from me now, and I won't—I won't blame you if you use sleeping potions or body-binds or whatever you think you need to on me, if you really think my life is in danger." He glared sternly at Draco. "For no other reason."

The relief filling Draco's eyes was painful in its intensity. He bowed his head. Harry looked the other direction, and hoped that Draco would understand when the truth emerged. He didn't like to think he was risking his bond with Draco by lying. On the other hand, he could be risking his only true chance to heal and help other people if he told the truth now.

And my mother always taught me to think of others first.

"Thank you, Harry," Draco whispered, and then McGonagall came back with breakfast for both of them and a stern injunction for Harry to rest and Draco to go back to the Slytherin common room, and there was no more time to talk, and no more moments in which Harry had to fool Draco, either. He ate the eggs and sausage McGonagall had brought hungrily enough, remembering only now that his last meal had been with James on the beach yesterday morning. He hadn't been able to eat other meals as the day wore on and the time got nearer for Connor to brave the Third Task.

That was another thing that made him wince, the thought of his brother.

He'll just have to understand, too.

Lily slowly smoothed the letters in her hands and let out a little painful breath. She was standing in the kitchen of the house at Godric's Hollow, the same place where her life had changed forever a year and a half ago, with summer sunlight pouring in through the windows. The sun could have been a thousand times brighter, though, and its radiance could not have matched the brilliance of her mood at the moment.

Dumbledore's letter had come first, telling her that she would have good news in a short while, and to prepare for a journey to Hogwarts.

And then had come the letter from Harry, in which he told her that, now that Voldemort was arisen, he thought it appropriate he should return home for a little more training. Could she come and talk to him? There were questions he wanted to ask her, first.

Sometimes, sometimes, oh how she hated to admit it, her long faith had wavered and almost cracked during the months she spent here, alone except for the house elves Albus granted her. James's letters, and Albus's, could barely reassure her, not without word from her sons. She had started thinking, sometimes, as she sat by herself in the silence, that perhaps she had done something wrong in raising Harry and Connor the way she had.

She did not want to think that way, because she had gone too far down this path to be wrong now, if she were wrong.

But now her faith was restored, glittering like a diamond in her mind, and her heart had been healed in the sunlight.

Albus was right. Harry always was going to come home at last. And if I'm alone with him, or just him and James, for eight weeks, then I can set to rights all the bad lessons he's learned in the outside world—tell him the truth about himself, and get him to acknowledge it, and help him avoid being a Dark Lord.

All my sacrifices are recompensed, all my mistakes are paid for. Harry opened his eyes slowly. He had known for some time that there was another presence in the room, and even who it was, but he'd wanted to wait until he was sure that no one else was coming in. But no, it seemed that Draco was in the Slytherin common room, and Snape would know better than to visit him, and Madam Pomfrey was fully occupied with trying to learn something about changeable venoms in her books. Harry wasn't even sure that Connor knew about his condition yet—Draco had admitted to not being able to find him last night, and he might just think that Harry was somewhere around the school—so he didn't truly fear a visit from his brother.

Harry sat up at last and nodded to Dumbledore. "Sir," he said. "I trust that you know I've written to my mother?"

Dumbledore blinked. Harry blinked a moment later. Why did I think he knew that? He wasn't sure, but there it was, a certainty as unshakeable in his head as the idea that Lucius would turn his back on him once he saw the disfigured hand.

"Ah, yes, I do, Harry," said the Headmaster a moment later. "And as you have no doubt surmised by now, I have the hospital wing under a variation of the spell that protects Hogwarts from Muggle eyes. Anyone but your mother thinking to visit you right now will find themselves caught up in other plans instead, and they will not return to thinking about you until your interview with Lily is done."

Harry relaxed. "All right. Thank you, sir." He felt, because he could not prevent it, the tickle of uneasiness that ran through him at the thought of being alone with Dumbledore, or even with Lily, in a room where no one else could reach him, but then he told himself again that this was for the best. It was a harder road than just going back to Malfoy Manor would have been, but wasn't the harder road the right one, most of the time?

Yes, he answered himself firmly. Negotiating compromises for the magical creatures is harder than binding them with webs. Creation is harder than destruction. Forgiving someone is harder than just being angry at them all your life. And it seems that I'm born for the hard road, one way or the other.

"I will leave you alone with Lily during your interview," said Dumbledore, pulling Harry's attention back to himself. "She expressed a desire to speak to you with no one else listening."

Harry nodded. It was what he'd been hoping for, but hadn't been sure he had a right to demand. "Thank you, sir," he repeated. Then he drew in a deep breath. His mother was probably here already, or Dumbledore would not have cast the spell. Of course, since Lily lacked magic now, he couldn't distinguish her approach from that of anyone else. "I'm ready to see her now."

Dumbledore eyed him in silence for a long moment. Harry kept his face calm and his will resolute. He was ready for this, no matter the mad itching in the back of his head that said he wasn't.

“Very well, Harry,” said Dumbledore at last, and went to the doors of the hospital wing. “Then I will let her in.”

Harry lay back against his pillows and waited. His wound was only a bit more painful than before; what Madam Pomfrey had said about the curse spreading no differently than the poison, as long as it wasn't counteracted, was true. There was so much sunlight coming through the windows of the hospital wing. He watched it, and heard a distant song, so pure that it reminded him of Fawkes, in the moment before it faded and diminished.

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry drew in his breath and faced his mother.

She looked more fragile than she had been when he saw her last. She held no light-globe this time, but only a thin sheet of parchment Harry thought was his letter. She walked with no limp from the bite his snake had taken out of her ankle, Harry was glad to see. Her eyes met his steadily as she took the chair that Draco had sat in earlier.

“You said that you wanted to ask me some questions,” she whispered. “Anything, Harry. Now that you are coming home, I will give you anything that you want, with no holding back.”

Harry nodded tightly. He should be glad of her declaration, given that he wanted to ask her some extremely searching and personal questions. He didn't know why his throat had swollen shut, why he had to cough to get the words out, why Lily's watching him with patient, anxious eyes only made nausea boil up in his stomach.

The song shimmered in his ears. Harry shook his head, and his throat and head were clear, and his stomach was calm, and why had he ever thought that he felt as bad as he did?

“I want to know why you agreed to sacrifice us in the first place,” he said quietly. “What persuaded you that Godric's Hollow should be left open to Voldemort the night that he attacked us? Why did you become dedicated to the war effort in this particular way?”

Lily blinked at him, her mouth briefly falling open. Then she said, with a rusty chuckle, “I must admit, I didn’t think that would be what you asked.”

“I know the training you gave me,” said Harry. “I know the philosophy behind it. Now I want to know where you got that philosophy. Why do you believe the way you do?”

Lily sat back, nodding slowly. She linked her hands together on her stomach and said, “All right, Harry. You know I’ve told you before that I didn’t know anything about magic before my eleventh birthday. I came from a Muggleborn family, yes, but this wasn’t even a family who indulged my sister Petunia and me with stories like Santa Claus. My parents were very clear-minded people who didn’t hold with what they called ‘superstitious nonsense.’ Nevertheless, they believed in something when they could see it happen, and they had to admit that magic was real when they saw it happen. So they were happy and proud to have a witch in the family.”

Lily paused to draw breath. Harry turned his head again. He didn’t know why he expected the sunlight to be glaring on the windowsill, actively burning a hole in the stone, rather than just lying there tamely.

“My sister wasn’t very happy,” said Lily softly. “I tried not to let it bother me, but we’d been close as children, and her jealousy did hurt. She kept saying that it was like fairies stealing me away. So I came to the magical world determined to embrace the people here, since I didn’t really have a sister after I found out I could do magic.

“And I found out that I was in the middle of a world where everything was polarized, and there couldn’t be that kind of happy acceptance I’d craved and looked for. Voldemort was just rising then—not much more than a rumor and a name, but most people above the age of sixteen knew war was coming. Even we first-years knew there was something wrong, something dark and burning in the very air.

“And I found out that the fact I was Muggleborn still mattered, even though I was in Gryffindor. Students who wanted to show the right kind of beliefs loudly welcomed me, even when they weren’t people I

would have chosen as friends. Other students sneered at me, played pranks on me, called me names, all for a heritage I had no idea existed until just a few months before I entered Hogwarts. I was alone in a world I didn't understand, and even when I studied or asked questions, it didn't help. Even as they reacted to the war, most people didn't want to talk about it, as if that would somehow draw the war to them."

"You were alone," said Harry, feeling that he understood. The song was back, and he had to close his eyes for a moment. Sunlight lay on him, as heavy as a hand. "Did you start reading about pureblood history then?"

He opened his eyes to see Lily nodding. "Yes, I did. And I grew to understand my enemies better, and to realize that not every pureblood was an enemy—but also to realize that I could never be one of them. Oh, Harry, James's family was kind and welcoming to me, and so were children of other Light wizarding families, but they showed with every little speech and every little word that I wasn't, quite, their kind. They were all lordly condescension, and I was nothing but a peasant, and there were stupid beliefs about Muggleborn witches and wizards being less powerful than purebloods—never mind that pureblood families could have Squibs from inbreeding too closely. There was a stretch of time in my third year when I considered abandoning the magical world altogether."

"And then?" Harry asked. This mattered to him, he thought, of course it mattered to him. He had wanted to hear his mother's story before he went home, to understand more about what she had sacrificed and to see what effect her words would have on him. He had thought, hoped, that her words would hurt him. Then being in her presence would be a test to pass.

He hadn't expected to find himself thinking more about song and sunlight than about her words.

"And then Albus summoned me to his office, along with a small group of other Muggleborn students, and talked to me about what part I could play in the war." Lily smiled dreamily at the wall. "He told us that he'd noticed we wanted to do something, but were frustrated by our

lack of knowledge of the magical world, or just our lack of ability, since we were still children. He asked us if we wanted to be more than children. And I and a few of the other students said yes.”

Harry could feel his breath rushing in and out of his lungs. But he wasn’t breathing hard as he had been when trying to suppress tears. There was a pressure of warmth growing in the center of his chest—far below the wound, so it couldn’t be that—and an uneasy shifting and churning of thoughts in his mind.

Lily continued, obviously fully caught up in her tale. “And so we began secret training, not so much in spells—Albus didn’t want us to actually take the field until we were old enough—as in the ethics of sacrifice. Albus told us what would be coming, and a lot of what he predicted came to pass, like the specific Dark Arts spells Voldemort used. He told us the future would be terrible, but we could glow like beacons to brighten it. Many of the adult wizards were caught in the same trap of fear as our fellow students, and they wanted to stay neutral in the hopes that Voldemort wouldn’t notice them.” Lily snorted. “Fine policy that was when he began to slaughter them. But they still tried, always thinking that it might happen to the family two linchpins away, but it wouldn’t happen to them. So we were the ones who had to take up the burden of hope. Albus told us that the younger we became accustomed to carrying it, the easier a time we would have of it.”

She stretched out her hands before her and pulled them in towards her chest, as if gathering an invisible child there to hug. Harry watched her in a haze. Song was burning in his ears, buzzing in his stomach, and there was a slow, faint white glare of light before his eyes, like an afterimage that was growing instead of fading.

“By the time we left school, we were ready to fight, and so were the other young Gryffindors Albus had trained. And then one day he told me of the prophecy—he always trusted me more than any of them—and then, when you boys were born, I knew there was a good chance that it could apply to you.” Lily took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Harry found that he missed their clear, bright green, stained with tears though it was. It had been helping him focus beyond the light. “It was a hard struggle, but I nerved myself to leave you alone to face Voldemort in the end. Albus was the one who gave me my

courage, my place in this world. And it all fell out as he said. You survived. The path to Voldemort's destruction was laid. Do you know what it means to me, Harry, that it's partially through my sacrifices that you're going to destroy the monster who made my childhood in the wizarding world so hellish?"

Harry couldn't have responded if he tried. The light was burning all around him now, and inside his head, if the song was any indication. He thought it might have something to do with the phoenix web, but he couldn't imagine why Dumbledore or Lily would be trying to put one on him now, when he'd already agreed to listen to his mother and go home for the summer.

The light drew closer to him. In panic, he lashed out with his will in a mental blow, trying to prevent any web from ever gaining a hold on his mind.

He hit a block he hadn't even known was there. It was rather like falling across a chair in a darkened room. He let out a sharp breath, and then struck once more, instinctively, trying to destroy that block.

It broke.

The compulsion fell apart, and the sunlight rushed in.

This time, he could hear the song, rich and vivid and clear. Fawkes, of course it was, and he'd been singing along their bond, sending the sunlight all phoenixes were bound to along their connection, trying to wake Harry up. Harry didn't know if he'd actually wanted to panic Harry so much he struck out or just raise him into the clarity of sight, but either way, it had worked.

Harry opened his eyes, to see everything around him bathed in the clear, merciless light, and looked straight at his mother.

He saw her as she was to him now, and fell back against his pillows in shock. It was no wonder he hadn't been affected by her words. She was...

She was...

She was small.

Everything about her was small, and not just because she had no magic. The posture she'd taken in the chair, which before he might have thought was a noble bowing of her head and neck before circumstance, was a meek cringing. There was no honor and no pride in her face, only fear and a humiliated hope that she might yet get back something of what she'd lost, power or contact with magic. The hand she put out to him did not reach, but grasp.

Harry couldn't understand. I was angry and hurt at her at Christmas. Why have I managed to change my mind about her so completely?

Because he had been happy in the months between, he realized, Fawkes's song thrilling through him and carrying the truth along his veins like blood. He hadn't reserved a spot for Lily in his life. He had no need of her, not any more. Perhaps a month, two months, ago he might have turned back to her, but since then, he'd freed the southern goblins and had the bond with Draco and realized...

Realized that Snape had betrayed him, and lost his hand, and done and seen murder.

Harry grimaced. Not every experience in those months has been happy.

But he had grown beyond her now. He would always carry the marks of her training. That was true, and that was probably what people like Millicent were thinking of when they insisted that Harry was marked by his past.

But he needed her no longer. And now he had heard her story.

And what came upon him then, a stream of warm emotion quite separate from the freedom that Fawkes had handed him, was compassion.

Lily had, in a way, been under a web of her own, though Harry doubted that Dumbledore had used compulsion on her. He couldn't

have known, so long before the prophecy, that this one Muggleborn girl would become that important, and he had keener and less chancy weapons to hand. Harry had no doubt that Dumbledore had trained Lily even as she said he had and that that training was the web on Lily's mind, imprisoning her free will and making her think that she mattered only in the context of war.

She is so small. She has sacrificed her free will and foisted sacrifices on others for a false ideal. She's wasted her life. Why should I not pity her? She hurt me, yes, but I can choose to forgive that. And I do so choose.

For that matter, where did Dumbledore learn those ethics of sacrifice? Could he have been a victim of his own mentor, and that mentor a victim of his own, and so on back down the line? Harry drew in a deep breath. Then, if that's the case, what they did to me, deliberate as it was, was really only the end result of a long line of people making sacrifices. Perhaps none of them ever escaped it. But I am the lucky one, the one who can choose to end the chain here.

I am vates, and I can step away.

Even as Fawkes materialized on his arm, however, Harry had two other realizations.

I can't let on to Dumbledore that I've broken his compulsion, or that I even know about it. He would only try to imprison me again. I can't go and live with Lily for the summer—I see that now—but he'll try to force me if he thinks I'm not going. I have a grace period, those days that Madam Pomfrey says I have to stay here and heal my wound. I'll pretend to be under the compulsion for that length of time, and think about where I'm going to go instead and how I'm going to keep Dumbledore out of my mind when I do.

The second realization was more startling. Even as Harry bowed his head and said softly, "I understand, Mum, and thank you," he was reeling under the implications of it.

A vates is a vates to everyone and anyone, breaking any webs. Perhaps my greatest responsibility is to the magical creatures, but

that doesn't mean that I'll only free them. I have to consult the free wills of wizards and witches, and try to unbind them where I find them tied. Doesn't that mean—doesn't that mean that I have to be vates to Dumbledore and Lily, too, and try to break them free of these webs of absurdities that imprison their minds?

It made him sick for a moment, as Lily leaned across and clasped his hand and murmured thanks to him in a broken voice, but he could see no way around it. If he started making exceptions, then he would be forever doing so—saying the northern goblins were too hard to free, for example, and must simply remain imprisoned. He would have to be vates for even Voldemort and Bellatrix, if they came to him and were sincerely repentant, unlikely as that was to happen. So he had to be vates for Dumbledore and Lily.

But that also means that I have to keep them from impinging on the free wills of others. And I have to start doing it immediately. Lily will be easy. I'll just tell her that I'm coming home for the summer, and she'll go back to Godric's Hollow contented for a little while.

Dumbledore, though...

Fawkes gave him an encouraging croon, and Harry smiled down at him and stroked his feathers.

"He must have come to you after you knew you were the Boy-Who-Lived," said Lily. "He did, didn't he? A reminder of your allegiance to the Light."

Fawkes squawked indignantly, but Lily would not know he was indignant. Harry just nodded, while his mind turned to Dumbledore.

If Fawkes will help me, I think I can manage to contain his compulsion. And my deception should help me with him, too. He's still so focused on controlling me that I don't think he'll trouble looking elsewhere. Play the good little puppet for the next few days, and that will make him complacent. Then I can think more seriously about how to set him on the road to realizing what he's done, and healing.

The thought, the plan, was like a lifeline, towing him to shore. Harry could feel himself relax completely for the first time since Karkaroff had Porkeyed him away yesterday. He had always done his best healing when he was helping other people. He could do it that way this time, too.

Of course, if I'm going to act like an unbinder, then I have to unbind all the unnecessary deceptions.

It was a necessary one, he told himself, that made him kiss his mother on the cheek and say, "I've decided to come back home with you, but I need to stay here for five days while Madam Pomfrey heals my bite wound from Voldemort." He touched his chest. "I'll see you again then?"

Lily smiled tenderly at him. "Of course, Harry." She briefly skimmed his shoulder with her hand just above the wound. "If I still had my magic, I think I could have healed this," she said softly.

Harry just bowed his head, and sat in silence until she was gone.

There have been so many sacrifices, and they haven't made her any more courageous or Dumbledore any wiser. They have to stop.

And that means that I have to go have a little talk with Draco.

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Only Forward

Harry met Draco in the hallway outside the hospital wing. Draco had a worried look on his face, but, to Harry's surprise, it didn't relax into relief on seeing him. Instead, he narrowed his eyes and hissed, "What are you doing? Madam Pomfrey told you to stay in bed the rest of the day!"

Harry shook his head. He'd honestly forgotten his promise to the matron, and had only wanted to see Draco and tell him the decision he'd come to. "I'm sorry. I—"

Draco took his hand and pulled him back towards the door of the hospital wing. At least he kept his voice low as he snapped at Harry. "I think you should show her that hand. What if the wound becomes infected?"

"It was cauterized—"

Draco closed his eyes. "I either didn't know that, or I'd forgotten it," he whispered. He nudged the doors of the hospital wing open and pulled Harry back to his bed. Harry rolled his eyes, but complied with the motion. It seemed like something Draco needed to do.

Once he was arranged to Draco's satisfaction, Harry took the opportunity to begin his speech before Draco could go off into some rant about how inappropriate it was to be running around with a missing left hand and a cursed bite wound. "I wanted to let you know that you won't need the sleep potions and the body-binds and whatever other spells you had ready," he said. "I'm not going to go off into danger without telling you again."

Draco stared at him. Harry stared back. He did consider this a true resolution, and if he didn't yet dare tell Draco everything—Dumbledore could be listening through the wards, and was almost certainly doing so—he could promise this much. It would relieve the most pressing worry Draco had about him.

"You can't just change your whole behavior like that," Draco said at last, revealing the source of the disbelief in his eyes.

"Yes, I can." Harry balled his hand into a fist, and it felt as though the left one were doing the same, even though he knew it wasn't. Fawkes, who had briefly vanished when Lily had gone, popped into being on his shoulder again and let out a soft, reassuring croon. Harry let it soothe him back into a faint smile at Draco. "If I concentrate. If I try to remember, instead of just dashing away. I can't say I'll stop trying to save other people's lives, but I'll talk to you about it and take you along." He imagined what Dumbledore would be thinking as he listened, and made his voice soft and submissive, a sop for his invisible audience. "It's the least I could do, after—after the graveyard—" He turned his head away as though overcome.

Draco leaned forward at once, his confusion evident. "Harry?" His empathy would be telling him something much different than Harry's words and expressions, Harry knew.

"I can only ask you to trust me, Draco." Harry raised his eyes and made his gaze as intense as he knew how. "I made you the promise you wanted. Now will you please leave me alone?" He dropped a whine into the middle of his tone. That would help fool Dumbledore, too, to think that Harry was recoiling into himself instead of reaching out.

Draco blinked, once, twice. He knew Harry was passing some sort of hidden message along to him, but seemed unable to make much more of it than Trust me.Wait.

Since that was the only message Harry intended to give, he was satisfied, or he would be if his friend just accepted it, gave in, trusted him, and waited.

Draco bowed his head. "All right," he whispered. "But I don't believe that you'll keep this promise yet, Harry."

"That's understandable," said Harry. "You'll have to see me keep it first, right?" He closed his eyes. "I think I'll rest for a little while," he said. "I went—I mean, my mind feels tired. Thinking, you know." That was another silent gift to Dumbledore, to make him think Harry was

tempted to talk about the conversation with Lily, but wouldn't. He let his breaths settle closer and closer to true sleep.

Bewildered silence from the side. Harry rested, and waited, and hoped that Draco did not push it. He did mean his promise, as it happened, but Draco being too suspicious could mean a renewal of the compulsion, and then he would fail to keep his promise, because he would be dashing into danger all the time.

Besides, Draco would want to kill Dumbledore and Lily if he knew about the compulsion or the visit. Promise or no promise about Lily, Harry trusted him to find some way around his words if he felt strongly enough. Telling his parents was an option, as well as abducting Harry to Malfoy Manor.

It would take Harry some time to persuade him that forgiving Lily and Dumbledore, helping them heal, was best, rather than angrily opposing them. What they had done was—well, done. What they could do in the future was what concerned Harry, and the moment Draco let himself be persuaded Harry wanted to rest, he would start changing Dumbledore's actions.

"All right," Draco whispered at last. "All right. Since I didn't tell Connor about you yet, and it's not common knowledge you're in the hospital wing, I'll go and do that." He paused, but Harry didn't open his eyes to see the expression on his face, which left him with the gesture when Draco leaned down and kissed his forehead. "I love you," he whispered, and then departed.

Harry breathed, and breathed, and breathed, and then reached out along the bond to Fawkes. Fawkes, is Dumbledore paying attention to us at all?

The phoenix began softly singing a song that Harry thought was a lullaby. It formed a vision in his mind, however, of the Headmaster reading paperwork with a smile on his face. Harry gave a shallow nod. Yes, he thought Dumbledore had been watching him after all during the conversation with Draco, but now he wasn't.

Slowly, carefully, Harry explained to Fawkes what he wanted to do, altering his opinion several times when the phoenix gave a little croon of approval or chiding. Then he reached out, even as Fawkes lifted his voice in more glorious music, and carefully touched the outer edges of Dumbledore's mind.

The Headmaster was a floating presence in the school, a much more powerful one than anyone else. His gifts of magic and compulsion, as well as his mind, extended beyond the edges of his body like an aura. Harry walked carefully through them, guided by Fawkes, who lived in this world of light and color and fire all the time. He was alert to any small twitch that would reveal Dumbledore had noticed them and they would have to leave before he could sense who it was.

Dumbledore kept concentrating on his paperwork, though, and Fawkes found Harry an old door from the time when he used to be Dumbledore's friend. In a few minutes, Harry stood in an unfamiliar mental world, shaped like Hogwarts, but with odd decorations: much wider windows, mirrors reflecting the constant flow of sunlight through them, and only three House crests, repeated separately and in a twining flow of lion, badger, and eagle. Harry was unsurprised to see that the lion was the largest in the shared pictures, rearing over the eagle and the badger as they crouched and looked up at it.

No place for the snake here, he thought, then shook his head. Sarcasm wouldn't put him in the right mood to start gently rendering Dumbledore's compulsion powerless, and such an odd thought might shove his presence to the forefront of Dumbledore's mind.

Carefully, with Fawkes a mental presence beside him, he sought out the compulsion, here represented by Hogwarts's wards. The Headmaster had used this particular gift to enforce his will so often that it underlay all his other magic. Harry had a hard time thinking of a way to tame it, until he remembered that Dumbledore was a Declared Light wizard.

He reached up and touched the mental analogue of Fawkes, asking to borrow one bright feather—not actually a feather, of course, but the phoenix's magic and will concentrated into images. Fawkes crooned happily and let one drop into his hand.

Harry began waving it, lighting a small fire at the tip of it. The wards came alive at once, Dumbledore's compulsion reacting first to a mental intruder, and Harry felt the Headmaster lift his head, blinking.

Harry reacted back, drawing up the fire from Fawkes's feather and sending it in shining strands to loop around the compulsion. Even then, however, he did not create a web; he did not think he could do so and still keep a clean conscience about the healing. He set the light flowing in streams, delicate and fascinating—and familiar to Dumbledore. He would think his phoenix was trying to reconnect with him.

The wards turned to follow the streams. Dumbledore was thinking about Fawkes now, Harry knew, as memories of the phoenix flashed past him. He did not realize—of course, he couldn't unless he was actually in his own head now and witnessing what Harry was doing—that the wards of compulsion were flowing alongside the streams of light, subdued by their interest. There was another presence here, they knew now, but it was one who had been once been friendly. And the light was so brilliant. Anything that added friendly radiance to the inside of their master's head was welcome. Part of Dumbledore's gift would focus on following the extra light around, some of his thoughts would shift in that direction instead of focusing on other things, and he would never know what was truly happening.

And since the part of his mind taken up like that was the one that did most of his compelling, that would greatly lessen his intention of compelling other people.

It's a delicate defense, but it will do for now, Harry thought, as he slipped out of Dumbledore's mind and back into his own. Fawkes came along with him, song low and peaceful. This had been a good idea, and he was happy to have helped.

Harry did feel a faint pang of guilt. He wished he could simply have spoken with Dumbledore, instead of interfering with his free will in any way. But he didn't think Dumbledore would listen to him the way he was now, and he would almost certainly renew the compulsion. Harry

had to be careful, had to hide. In time, he would, he thought, free the Headmaster from the cage he'd put himself in.

I suppose Snape would think that unworthy, he reflected drowsily, the mental effort combining with the magical to relax him. But I can forgive his crimes against me if I want, and I'm not the one who has the right to punish him for his crimes against others. What I can do is make sure he won't commit any more. That is more worthy than any other course of action, whatever Snape thinks.

Harry woke up near evening. For a few moments, he lay in silence, enjoying the slanting, purple light, his mind perfectly blank and perfectly at ease. The only person with him in the hospital wing was Fawkes, and that helped increase the sense of rest.

Then the hospital doors were flung open, and Connor came storming down the middle of the aisle of beds, staring at Harry all the way.

Harry winced when he sat up, and saw his brother's eyes go immediately to the side of his chest where the bite mark was, and then to his left hand. Harry winced again, and stifled the urge to moan. Draco told him everything, didn't he?

"I asked Malfoy to set a spell telling me when you'd wake up," said Connor casually, as he sat down in the chair next to the bed. That chair is seeing a lot of traffic today, Harry thought, attempting to take his mind off the misery of the impending conversation. "And then I asked him to leave us alone while we talked. He did both those things. That's good of him, I think." He paused. "There was one thing I didn't tell him."

Harry frowned, unable to imagine what that could be. Was it how worried he was about me? That was flattering, to think his brother was that worried about him, but from the fixed stare Connor went on giving him—for one moment, and then another, and then another—Harry doubted that was it.

"Well?" Harry asked at last, and tried to make a joke. "I've had enough suspense in the last day, Connor. Don't leave me in it now."

Connor ground his teeth with an audible sound. "I had a letter from James," he said. "It was a short letter. He didn't need long to babble at me and tell me that everything was fixed, that everything would be all right over the summer." He leaned forward, until he was approximately three inches away, staring at Harry. "He said that you wanted to come spend the summer with him and Lily at either Godric's Hollow or Lux Aeterna."

Harry sucked in a breath between his teeth. He would never have thought that James would be so stupid as to write to Connor. Of course, perhaps he thought that Connor would agree as long as Harry sincerely wanted this.

Connor had got to be more like Draco and Snape than James in the last few months, though. There were times that he would distrust and oppose Harry because he thought that would do the most good, Harry thought.

And he knew, none better, how stubborn his brother could be.

"Look, Connor—" Harry began, soothingly. Dumbledore would understand if he talked like this, he thought. Having Connor tell what he thought was the truth to other people would interfere with the summer plans, and that was not something Harry wanted to deal with, particularly if Snape found out.

I hate this secrecy. But I have to hold to it, or the thing they all think is true will be true. Dumbledore will probably panic and put me under a compulsion strong enough that I can't break it—

Wait. McGonagall. She has some control of the wards. As long as we do it when the Headmaster is occupied, or Fawkes and I strengthen our hold on him a little bit more, then I can ask her to manipulate the wards so he can't hear us. Then I can tell Connor and Draco the actual truth.

Harry relaxed. Connor didn't miss the change. He'd had his mouth open to rant, but now he sat up and shut it, his hazel eyes hard. "What?" he demanded.

“Professor McGonagall already gave me a lecture today,” said Harry, letting his voice whine again. “If you really want to lecture me, go get lessons from her. Or just bring her here.” He rolled his eyes, then pinned Connor with the same intense glare he’d given Draco, trying to talk with his gaze. “I’m sure that she’ll be just thrilled to hear what you have to say. And so will Draco. And all of you will be so thrilled to hear my response.” He let his head fall back on the pillows and turned away as if sulking.

He could feel Connor’s silent bewilderment. But he must have thought he had nothing to lose. Harry certainly wasn’t going anywhere.

“All right,” he said. “All right. I don’t know what’s going on, Harry, but something obviously is.” His voice grew firm again, as though he was not about to let whatever Harry had to say change his mind. “And when I come back with them, I really do expect to hear all about it.”

He stood up and left the hospital wing, less dramatically than he’d entered it. Harry rolled back over and slowly exhaled.

Is he busy, Fawkes?

The phoenix let out a reassuring croon, and Harry braced himself to wait, hoping that it wouldn’t take Connor long to find Professor McGonagall and Draco and return with them.

The three of them entered sooner than Harry would have liked—sooner than he was ready for, at least. He tried a nervous smile, but it fell flat at the dangerous gleam in Draco’s eyes. Connor had told him about James, then. Harry swallowed.

Draco didn’t even wait. He had his wand drawn as they approached the bed, and he tried to cast a body-bind on Harry.

“Expelliarmus! Mr. Malfoy!” McGonagall did not so much bark the words as hiss them. She grabbed Draco’s wand and fixed him with a steady stare. “I suppose you have a good reason for trying to hex Mr. Potter?” Harry could see dislike in the lines of her face. McGonagall never had liked Draco, and Harry wasn’t sure why, other than the fact

that he secretly sneered at her, and had mocked her behind her back, and made it plain that he thought he could do Transfiguration better without her instruction...

Yes, come to think of it, that might be enough reason.

"He's clearly acting irrationally, Professor," said Draco coolly. "I told him what would happen the next time he did that. And he doesn't keep his promises, either," he added, with a harsh glance at Harry that didn't hide the hurt behind the anger.

"Deputy Headmistress," said Harry, earning McGonagall's scrutiny. He knew Dumbledore wasn't paying attention right now, but he could start doing so at any moment, and that made it so hard to ask for what he wanted. "Could you—that is, you're making progress with the wards, aren't you?"

Connor stared. Draco blinked, and then nodded as if he got it.

McGonagall had seized it faster than either of them, by the slight widening of her eyes. Harry wondered if she was as completely Gryffindor as he had always thought she was.

"Yes, I am, Mr. Potter," she said. "Would you like a demonstration?"

"If you don't mind," said Harry, slumping back against the pillows in relief. He fought not to wince as that strained the bite wound. That would be healed tomorrow, Madam Pomfrey had said, or possibly tonight, and that meant that he had to just live with the pain until then.

McGonagall nodded once, and then lines of red and gold coiled around the bed. Harry studied them, but wasn't familiar with them; many complicated wards were really layered defensive spells, not single ones in and of themselves, and could only be understood by wizards who cast them or integrated their essences into them. Harry asked Fawkes in his head if the wards would prevent the Headmaster from listening in, and Fawkes warbled his approval. Harry relaxed a little further.

“The Headmaster thinks I’m his good little dupe,” he said. “I’m not, not really. But I have to pretend to be for the next few days, or he’ll think something’s up.”

“And that would have something to do with you going back to your parents?” Draco’s voice was a hammer blow.

“I’ve decided not to do it, now,” said Harry quietly. “I don’t know where I’ll stay for the summer yet, but that option’s definitely out.” He hesitated, then decided that no explanation would be good enough without the full truth. At least with McGonagall, a responsible adult, there, Draco was unlikely to go storming off to the Headmaster’s office and try to hex him. “Dumbledore put a compulsion on me that took advantage of my weakened emotions, and worked with my training to make me think this was a good idea. Fawkes finally broke me free of it this afternoon.”

“Was that when Lily visited?” Connor demanded. “James said she was going to.”

Harry frowned. I’m disturbed that he’s taken to calling them by just their names, instead of what they were to him. He was calling James Dad just a short time ago. Really, I can’t blame him for not wanting to be around Lily—and I wouldn’t want him around her either—but I hope his relationship with James can be salvaged.

He had another reason to wish that Connor had kept quiet a moment later, when Draco made a sound that resembled a groan and a sigh and a whimper all mixed. “Harry,” he whispered. “You would have gone that far backward?”

“Only forward, now,” said Harry impatiently. “It was the compulsion, I told you.”

“And where are you going to stay for the summer?” McGonagall’s lips were pursed, but her face wasn’t pale, as Harry had half thought it would be. Instead, her eyes shone. She looked as if she were going forth to battle.

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “I haven’t decided that, yet.”

"The Manor," Draco whispered. "Harry, you have no other choice, unless you change your mind about Professor Snape."

Fawkes crooned helpfully on Harry's shoulder, and once more poured his choice—the vision of the Sanctuary—into his mind. Harry shoved the vision away, splintering it into shards of light, not hard enough to hurt the phoenix, but hard enough to make his rejection plain. "No," he said aloud. "Either the Seers or Snape would make me go backward. They're too obsessed with the past. I have to go forward. I can't go crawling back to Lily, and I can't obey Dumbledore the way he wants me to, and I can't dwell on the past. I've decided to forgive Lily and Dumbledore—"

"What."

Draco said it as if he could not believe it, as if it would not dare to be true, as if the reality of the universe would bend and change with his words, and make Harry the unforgiving kind of person who would insist on punishment. His eyes were large now, and not less bright than McGonagall's, though Harry knew the cause was different.

Harry drew in a deep breath. "Draco, listen to me."

"I don't want to," Draco whispered. "I don't want to, Harry. That—that's insane. You've left them alive behind you how many times, and they've come back up to stab you in the back how many fucking times?" By now he was shouting, and if Harry had had empathy himself, he was fairly sure he would have been overwhelmed by Draco's emotions. "No. No. I refuse to allow this, Harry."

"Draco," Harry repeated. He hated to do this, but it was the only way to arrest Draco in the middle of an action that might otherwise cause everyone more pain. "You promised to leave her alone."

"I never said anything about him," Draco snarled.

"I'm handling him." Harry almost laughed at the expression on his face, but the first ripple through his muscles made the bite ache like hell, and he muffled it. "Did you think I would make the resolve to

move forward and then leave him alone? No. I'm confining his compulsion, first. I'll have to move slowly. He's so alert, and I have to access his mind through Fawkes. But I can handle him. I want to keep him from hurting others, and me, too. Then I'll do what I can to get him to listen to me, and see that what he did was wrong."

"And her?" Draco's voice was low and ugly.

"I'm not sure yet," Harry admitted. "It will probably depend on where I stay for the summer. I'll ignore her for the eight weeks if I can, so that I can get some rest and decide on a better course of action. Otherwise, I'll make sure that she can't touch my brother or anyone else she might go after, and then handle her by letter. I think, so long as she believes that she might have some chance of influencing me, I'll always be her prime target."

"You're handling this all wrong," Draco whispered.

"And how would you suggest I handle it?" said Harry, then held up his hand. "No, wait, never mind. You would suggest that I expose everything that happened to the wizarding world." He shook his head. "That wouldn't get them justice, Draco, nor healing and understanding. That would get them ripped into bloody shreds."

"That's what they deserve!" Draco didn't even seem to realize that he was breaking his promise not to speak ill of Lily. His face had gone so savage that Harry didn't recognize him. Of course, he was still Draco—just a part that Harry had never met until now. Draco was usually gentle with him, understanding so much and urging him to take steps only as he felt ready for them. Not now. Very much so, not now.

"Pardon me if I don't think seeing the Headmaster of Hogwarts ripped to bloody shreds would do the war effort much good," said Harry, freezing his own voice. "Pardon me if I don't see what good it would do Lily, who doesn't even have magic to defend herself any more, forced to act out her shame on the stage of the Daily Prophet. No. I'll handle this, Draco. I won't be kind in forcing them to face up to their delusions. And I am going to use force on them, the same way I

would on Voldemort and other people who've proven they won't stop at certain limits. I'll feel guilty about it, but I'll use it. I'll handle this."

Draco just stared at him, breathing hard.

"And now I have to ask you to make another promise," said Harry.

"I don't care what you make me swear by." Draco had never resembled the dragon he was named for more than at that moment, Harry thought. He reminded Harry of the Welsh Green, as much disdainful pride as anger. "I am not going to swear a vow not to hurt Dumbledore."

"That isn't what I meant, you prat," said Harry, rolling his eyes. "I'm going to ask you not to tell Snape about any of this."

Draco went quite still then, as if he had thought of something Harry didn't know. He bowed his head. Harry felt the struggle happening inside him, and knew it would be a mistake to try and influence it. He waited.

At last, Draco lifted his head, and hissed out between his teeth, "All right. All right, damn you. But only because you have a plan, and you made that promise not to go into danger any more. It's off if you ever, ever do anything like let your mother visit you without warning me again."

"I was under the compulsion then, and that's not going to happen again, so Lily visiting won't, either," said Harry, vast relief flowing through him. "Thank you, Draco."

He looked up at Connor and McGonagall. "I'm not going to them for the summer," he said. "I promise you that. Are you satisfied? Are there any other questions that you need to ask?"

Both of them shook their heads. Harry didn't know if they were truly satisfied, or if they simply needed the time to assimilate this new information. McGonagall would probably ask him more questions later, Harry thought, but she already had some hints about his past anyway. He would deal with telling her new information.

“Do you want me to leave the wards up around your bed, Harry, so that Albus cannot spy on you?” McGonagall asked.

Harry shook his head. “No. He would notice if he couldn’t see me at least sometimes. Thank you, though, Professor.”

McGonagall nodded, and handed Draco’s wand back to him, with a warning look. The wards came down—just in time for Madam Pomfrey to bring in a tray of food, murmuring words about changeable venoms and the position of the moon, and then hurry away again. Connor squeezed Harry’s hand tightly, once, and strode out of the hospital wing. McGonagall followed more slowly, turning at the doors to face Harry.

“You know that you can talk to me if there is ever anything you need, Mr. Potter,” she said. “I hope you know that.”

“I do, Professor,” said Harry, reluctantly admitting that even the beef broth Madam Pomfrey was serving him smelled delicious. “Thank you.”

She inclined her head to him, keeping it bowed longer than strictly necessary, and left.

Harry tried to share his meal with Draco, as he moved around to the chair, but Draco shook his head. “I ate earlier,” he said, “because I thought that you might try that. You’ll eat all of this, Harry.” He paused, and then reached out and stroked Harry’s hair back from his forehead. Confused, wondering if Draco wanted to see the lightning bolt scar, Harry kept still.

Draco was indeed staring at the scar, but Harry didn’t think he was really seeing it. He was looking at something else. Then he closed his eyes and put his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Merlin, Harry,” he whispered. “Aren’t you ever going to get any rest? Any peace?”

Harry could understand why he said that. There had been an awful lot happening in the past few days. But he knew just how to answer—with the truth, in fact. “That’s the reason I’ve made the plans I have, Draco. In the end, I am going to have peace, because I’ll help other people. And I love being vates and helping others, you know that.”

Draco sat down heavily, keeping his eyes closed. “I meant just a rest, now,” he whispered. “Some chance to recuperate yourself.”

Harry frowned in confusion as he started eating. “I’m in the hospital wing,” he said, around spoonfuls. “I am resting.”

Draco gave a little half-laugh, half-sob, and opened his eyes again. His gaze startled Harry. It looked much like his own, older than the eyes of most of the teenagers around them.

“Of course you are,” he said. “At least I can be here to make sure you really do rest.”

He sat there, holding Harry’s hand and talking softly to him. Millicent came to visit, and Blaise, and since Draco refused to leave Harry’s side, they got sent to the library for books Harry wanted to read: mostly books on removing Dark incantations, as it happened. Harry didn’t know if he could break the spells that Bellatrix had put on his wrist, but he was going to try.

It was only when he was falling asleep in the middle of a page that he realized he had made an important tactical error.

Neither McGonagall nor Connor had promised not to tell Snape. “Mr. Potter. Mr. Potter, can you hear me?”

Harry stirred drowsily and opened his eyes, flexing his hand. It felt wrong, oddly cold, until he realized that Draco had been moved from the chair and levitated into a second bed, so that he couldn’t be gripping it. On his shoulder, Fawkes gave a sleepy croon. Madam Pomfrey stood near Harry, holding her wand high. It was lighted with Lumos, and her face was haggard.

It took Harry a long time to focus on her. He'd been hearing a call in his dreams, a rising, rushing, and falling voice. It reminded him of the ocean, but the ocean didn't sing like that. It was enough to occupy all his attention.

"I am sorry to wake you so early," the matron whispered, "but the most powerful incantations to end a changeable venom need to be performed at sunrise."

That made sense to Harry. Sunrise to oppose sunset, the passage from darkness into light made to undo the damage that the passage from light into darkness had done. He sat up, nodded, and waited as Madam Pomfrey gently peeled his pyjama top away from the wound. It occurred to Harry that he didn't remember getting into pyjamas. He frowned a little.

"Fawkes?" Madam Pomfrey said softly. "This is very delicate work. If you would please move?"

The phoenix uttered a sad little sound, but did lift and fly away from Harry to perch on the back of the chair. Madam Pomfrey stood over Harry, still, only turning a little so that her shadow from the Lumos spell fell over the wound. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. It occurred to Harry that she was struggling against some keen emotion, perhaps fear.

"Mr. Potter?" she whispered. "This will hurt. You may see uncomfortable things."

"I knew that," said Harry. "I don't think it can hurt more than getting the bite in the first place, or...seeing what I did."

Madam Pomfrey smiled a bit. "Yes," she said. "There is that."

She opened her eyes, and then lifted her wand. "Resecro!"

Harry felt a shock run through his body. He shivered, and then bowed his head. It felt as though Madam Pomfrey had reached into the bite wound and touched his heart, which beat not far from the blasted thing. And now she was pulling, or the spell was, tugging at

something dark curled in the center of his chest that had wanted to stay there. The thing snarled and dug its claws in, like a disturbed beast.

“Resecro!” said Madam Pomfrey a second time, and moved. Harry opened his eyes to see that she’d taken her shadow from the bite wound.

The dark thing began unfurling along the path of the incantation, fighting all the while. Harry felt an echo which he thought was the memory of Voldemort’s teeth digging into him, and shuddered. Then he cried out in spite of himself as sudden sharp, hot pain surged through the center of his chest.

An image of teeth shone before his eyes. Fangs, it had fangs, and it was fighting with all its might to hold onto him, they were ripping his flesh the way that Voldemort’s barbed teeth had...

“Resecro!” Madam Pomfrey shouted, and her voice had risen to a battle-cry, a bugle, no longer entreating or pulling, but commanding.

Desperately trying to focus on something other than the image of teeth or the scream resonating in his ears—a scream that was not his own—Harry opened his eyes and focused on Madam Pomfrey. He was startled to see that she was blazing, surrounded by a shimmering white corona, cutting like glass, like adamant. The magic was unfamiliar to him, and he supposed that it must come from her training as a mediwitch.

She put out a hand, and this time, her voice was contemptuous, dismissing the enemy from the field of battle. “Resecro.”

The curse screamed, and then it flew out of Harry, coiling and winding in Madam Pomfrey’s hand rather like a tapeworm. Madam Pomfrey strode across the hospital wing and lifted the writhing, squirming, biting curse into the light of the sunrise coming through the window.

Harry saw the moment when the thing combusted and began to burn from the inside, because the flames were at first a dark green, the

color of Avada Kedavra, turning to the living green of his own soul. Madam Pomfrey held her hand away from her as it burned, her face disgusted, and then, when it turned into green ash, continued holding her hand there as she turned her head and smiled at Harry.

"It's gone," she whispered. "I'll have to do a lot of washing, but it's gone. Rest now, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded dazedly. He was aware of Draco beside him, asking worried questions, awakened by the screaming, but he found that he couldn't keep his eyes open. Fawkes returned to the shoulder and crooned, and just in case there had been a doubt that Harry could resist sleep, the sudden warm presence near his head banished it. He fell comfortably into deep, peaceful slumber.

And he did not dream, but the rising, rushing, falling call was in his head all the same. This time, its message was unmistakable.

Come to us.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: A Toy and a Coin

Harry? Harry, I found my body!

Harry blinked and stirred, slowly opening his eyes. He hadn't heard from Regulus in so long that it took him a moment to recognize the voice. Then he smiled, as he realized that Regulus had really only left a few days ago to find his body and stay there until he knew where it was. It simply seemed longer than that, because of everything that had happened since then.

"Welcome back," he whispered, making sure to keep his voice low enough not to wake Draco. It was afternoon from the slant of the light, but both of them had irregular sleep schedules by now. What with the removal of the curse in his shoulder wound this morning, Harry thought that he could sleep for a week solid. "Where is it?"

In Wayhouse, Transfigured! Regulus would probably have done a jig if he could. I finally figured it out. I nosed and nosed and nosed, and still couldn't sense any trace of a preservation spell. And then I realized that I could sense some of the old and familiar magic from the summers I spent in Wayhouse. Spells on the room that used to be the nursery, in fact. I was just always in too much pain before to sense it, or I didn't stay with my body long enough, because it was boring. I'm Transfigured into a toy, I think.

"Of course," Harry breathed, remembering the room full of figurines that he and Narcissa had passed through when they were there. "Do you know what kind of toy you are?"

No. But it shouldn't be that hard to figure out. Once you can go to Wayhouse and I see it, I think I'll know it—

His voice paused abruptly. Harry shut his eyes, knowing what was coming.

Oh, Harry, Regulus whispered. No.

Harry sat in resigned silence as Regulus searched through his memories, growing more and more indignant at each one. He

retreated into incoherent promises of vengeance on some of them, moans of pain on others, and Harry was startled, when he found the image of Dragonsbane dying, to feel a warm silence much like a sensation of arms surrounding him. He shifted, wanting Regulus to go on. Being held like that occasioned a sense of faint unease in him even when Draco did it.

Regulus at last reached the last clear memory he had, of Madam Pomfrey removing the changeable venom from his body, and sighed out. Why do the worst things happen to you when I'm not there to prevent them? he whispered. And why do the worst things always happen to you?

Harry shrugged, then hissed as pain and exhaustion both punished him for the too-sudden movement. He couldn't believe that he was still so tired that even a few minutes awake wore him out. "Just lucky, I guess," he murmured. He knew he could speak in his head to Regulus, and he would switch to that if Pomfrey entered, but just now, he didn't want the intimacy of it. He could feel Regulus's rage and pity, sweeping through him in unending waves. That was bad enough. If you can even joke about being lucky—

"Bad fortune is luck, too." Harry lay back, trying to make plans. It didn't help that his thoughts were swirling like paint splattered with water, moving in constant, lazy colors, dragging him towards sleep. He hated it, but it seemed like he was going to have to rest some more. "We have to get you out of Wayhouse," he muttered, his eyelids drooping. "Now that the wards are down like that, someone might already have walked in. Unless you can raise them again?" he added hopefully.

I tried. But Wayhouse is having one of its moods again. I could raise the barriers on Grimmauld Place and the others. That one is just going to have to remain unprotected for right now.

Harry nodded. Merlin, even that made his head feel hot and heavy, as if he had a fever. "Then I'll write to Narcissa. Can you communicate with her?"

Well, no. She has no link to the Dark Lord. She was never Marked.

“We’ll work a solution out somehow,” Harry muttered. “I think I should go with her to Wayhouse, but—”

You are not going anywhere for the next four days except to sleep.

Harry blinked. The sense of the words was sliding away from him, and he had to carefully form and hold the next sentence in his head for a few moments before he spoke. “You need to be protected.”

Let the adults take care of this for once, Harry. Go to sleep.

Harry yawned, and burrowed into his pillows. The last thing he felt before he fell asleep again was a hand stroking his hair, and he honestly didn’t know if it came from outside or inside his head—if Draco had awakened and come over to soothe him, or if Regulus was causing it. He didn’t find out, either, because he was gone before he could open his eyes to check.

Harry opened his eyes, already feeling much better. As he should, he saw, with a quick glance out the windows of the hospital wing. It was already evening, and he hadn’t done anything productive with his day except for his brief conversation with Regulus. (He didn’t count lying passively under the spell that removed the changeable venom, because there Madam Pomfrey was doing all the work, and he had only to endure). He turned his head, his stomach rumbling, planning to ask for food and then parchment and ink so he could write to Narcissa.

He checked, sharply, when he saw her sitting in that damnable convenient chair next to his bed. Her hands were clasped on top of her folded knees, and except for her expression, she might have been a statue. Her blue eyes were alive, though, and alight, and fixed on his face. She gave a faint nod when she saw him awake, as though they were continuing a talk they’d already begun.

“I came to see what had happened to you,” she said quietly. “We have had letters from Draco, of course, and the warning that came when Lucius’s Mark burned. And the Minister made an official public statement that the Dark Lord had returned yesterday. But I still

wanted to know what you had suffered in person.” She leaned across the bed and put one hand on Harry’s forehead. Harry winced, even though he’d had no pain from his scar or visions about Voldemort since he worked such damage on his memory. The cool touch of Narcissa’s hand, combined with that look in her eyes, said that there was someone else here worried to death about him, though.

“I promise you,” said Narcissa, her voice eerily formal even though she wasn’t making one of the old binding oaths, so far as Harry knew, “that my sister shall suffer for what she has done.” Then her voice did take on the cadence of an oath. “Suffer to the ends of the earth and back again, suffer as salt in her wounds could make her suffer, suffer what she has done answered and given threefold.” She paused, then gave Harry a beautiful smile. The beauty could not hide the coldness of it. “When I am done, she will never laugh again.”

Harry couldn’t speak, and in his head, from his chill gasps of shock, Regulus was in the same state. In spite of the fact that he could be giving Narcissa an important clue if she didn’t already know about it, his eyes darted to the glamour of his left hand, only to find it gone.

“Draco did not tell me,” said Narcissa, answering his unspoken question. “He’s not even here right now, because I made him go eat dinner on his own. I cast a spell that banished glammers when I entered the hospital wing, Harry. I wished to know if you were hiding wounds worse than what Draco had told me you had. From there, my magic confirmed my sister’s handiwork..” She paused a long moment in silence. Then she said, words viper-quick, “I suppose that you can tell me the purpose of this foolish, dangerous farce?”

Harry lifted his head. Narcissa, of all people, had no right to reproach him. He had done this to avoid the scrutiny of the world she had grown up in. “I suppose you think that Lucius will accept me with a missing hand?” he spat. “That the other Dark pureblood families would think a crippled wizard any kind of a leader? I did this for a very good reason, and you know it.” He summoned the glamour back with a thought, this time making sure that his thumb curved the right way. He had adjusted the look of the illusion in the past day, with Draco’s reluctant help, and soon he was satisfied that he would have it perfect. “Kindly don’t lecture me on hiding it.”

Narcissa blinked slightly, her mouth falling open. Harry wondered why, until she reached out, grasped his chin, and carefully tilted his head so that she could look into his eyes. Harry stared back at her, determined that no matter what she might say, he would not crack.

So, of course, she had to say something that made sure he did.

“Harry,” she breathed, “how could you think that would matter, next to what you promise us?”

Harry jerked himself roughly away. Merlin, not again. He could feel tears burning and trembling near the back of his eyes. He scrubbed at them roughly. He was so fucking sick of crying, He was not going to do it again. And he wasn't going to pay attention to Narcissa's attempts to soften the blow. He knew that she only spoke of her own opinion, not the opinion of wizardkind in general. He would look weak enough when word of his confrontation with Voldemort got out—and he was sure that the Death Eaters would find ways to send that information slyly among the Dark purebloods. He would not add a weakness he could hide to the list.

“It's true,” Narcissa went on, her words dripping down like water wearing on a stubborn rock. “Yes, Harry, you are right, and many average wizards are forced to wear a glamour when something like this happens to them, or else get a replacement. But with someone of Lord-level power, that has never mattered. There was Lord Guile in the seventeenth century, who lost his left leg and simply used his magic to levitate him. He never hid it, and chose his allies from among those who showed no reaction, and his strongest friends and counselors and Inner Circle from those who were wounded in similar ways. The Broken Guard, they were called, and it meant nothing but respect.”

Harry shivered. He had heard of the Broken Guard, but he had not thought to apply that precedent to himself. It didn't matter, because—“He had the will to demand respect. He was a compeller. I don't want to force people to respect me.”

“Not will,” said Narcissa. “Magic. Haven’t you noticed yet, Harry, how honor is done you that would not be done anyone else at your age, because of your magic? And then, once someone gets inside that magic and sees and knows more about you, and sees what you have done for others, they will become your allies because of who you are. Believe me, most of the Dark purebloods would dismiss you as a child if not for your power.” She leaned forward and clasped Harry’s hand. “They have not. They might be shocked at this, but they are far more likely to swear vengeance as I have done.” She smiled a bit. “It is too bad that I am the only one who can swear that particular oath on Bellatrix. The others will have to content themselves with other Death Eaters. Lucius in particular...oh, Harry, he will be so angry.” Her smile widened and became dreamy. “You have never seen Lucius when he is really, truly in the grip of one of his overpowering rages. He’s so cold most of the time that one forgets he can torture with passion as well as detachment.” Her eyelashes fell, once, as she closed her eyes in some intense memory. “It was when I saw him fly into one of those rages after Crispus Rosier insulted me that I knew I really wanted to marry him.”

Harry couldn’t speak, couldn’t think. The thought of finding himself embraced and held close by those he had been sure would be among the first to push him away if they found out about the loss of his hand...

But then he did find his breath, and blurted out, “Do you really mean to tell Lucius about this?”

Narcissa sighed, the way she would if Harry had disappointed her. “Of course,” she said. “I mean to tell everyone, Harry.” She reached into the pocket of her robe and drew out a long scroll, which she opened with some ceremony and laid down before him. Harry looked down, and saw name after name in shining silvery ink, like moonlight. At the bottom was a blank space, a deep green line.

“These are the names of Dark pureblood wizards I have won to your cause with my dancing,” said Narcissa simply. “Some of them I approached as myself, some as Starborn, but all of them know the truth now, and all of them agreed. The majority of these particular agreements came after Walpurgis Night. When it comes down to it,

Harry, magic is more important to us than blood. And we have seen how highly you value that old, wild Dark magic, and how much you would risk to protect both it and the people who use it.”

Harry stared at the list in a daze. Most of the names were familiar, though not together. The first names were ones that had occurred and reoccurred in pureblood families for generations, the surnames ones that he had studied for days and weeks and months and years, reclining on his back with his books on the lawn of Godric’s Hollow.

Charles Rosier-Henlin. Mortimer Belville. Henrietta Bulstrode. Ignifer Apollonis. Edward Burke. Thomas Rhangnara. Honoria Pemberley...

And on, and on, and on.

Harry swallowed as he looked at the line of dark green ink at the bottom of the page. He knew that was where he would sign, binding himself to these wizards and witches. “And you are absolutely sure that they would remain with me in spite of my missing a hand?” he whispered.

“There is nothing that you could do that would deter them,” said Narcissa, “short of betraying your ideals, and turning out to be someone who would, say, Declare himself a Light Lord.”

“No,” said Harry. “But I have no intention of Declaring myself a Dark Lord, either.”

“I told them that.” Narcissa’s eyes were large and calm and just the slightest bit triumphant. “They did not care. In fact, some of them have had enough of Dark Lords to last them a while. The Dark Lord has intimidated them and punished them when they dare to do anything but send their children to be Marked. They’ve had their homes raided and valuable books taken.” She paused, and her lips pursed. “Arabella Zabini, in fact, gave me this message for you. She said that she is your firm ally now, because Death Eaters took her Parseltongue books.”

Harry experienced a brief stab of regret, but he was feeling too much else for it to make an impact. He stared at the scroll again, and shook

his head. He had always intended to move forward, of course, and make more allies, and take more people under his protection, but he had resigned himself to the thought of wearing a glamour while he did it.

The thought that he might not have to, and it would make no difference—

He could not assimilate it right now, he thought, and he rolled up the scroll and handed it back to Narcissa. Then he had a sudden thought, and sat up in alarm, looking around. Is Dumbledore listening to this conversation?

Fawkes appeared above him, and gave a run of notes that sounded like a chuckle. A vision formed in Harry's mind of Dumbledore bent over his paperwork again, vaguely wondering why he took more satisfaction in it than ever. Fawkes had kept an eye on him while Harry rested and recovered. Harry really should learn to trust him, in fact, since he would have let him know at once if Dumbledore had suspected anything about Narcissa's intrusion.

Harry relaxed. Then he looked at Narcissa as Regulus nudged him and whispered, You know that you can't go to Wayhouse in this condition. Besides, I'd knock you out if you tried. So ask her to go.

Harry sighed. "Narcissa, Regulus is with me, and he knows the location of his body now. He thinks that he was Transfigured into a toy and left at Wayhouse. Could you—"

Apart from the slight widening of Narcissa's eyes, there was no sign that she had been startled by the news, and she nodded, interrupting him. "I would be most happy to, Harry."

"He thinks he's in the nursery," said Harry. "Other than that, he's not sure what kind of toy he might be."

"I will simply fetch them all, then." Narcissa stood with a graceful motion. "Rest for right now, Harry." She leaned over him and kissed his forehead. "I have seen you," she said, "and I will carry a report back to the others." She turned and strode towards the doors.

Fawkes let out a warning chirp, to show that the Headmaster was paying attention again. Harry opened his mouth to warn Narcissa, but without even looking, she touched something in her pocket—a Portkey, it must be—and was gone, smoothly vanishing in a whirl of color.

Harry let himself fall back on the pillows, and sigh, and wait until Madam Pomfrey, still looking haggard from the magic she'd performed that morning, came out of her office and smiled at him. "Would you like some dinner, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, and let himself whine. He wanted to, and besides, it would help convince the Headmaster that he was still weak and acting like a child. "Can I have something other than beef broth, this time?"

Regulus snapped at him at the same time as Madam Pomfrey did. Beef broth makes you strong.

"Beef broth makes you strong, Mr. Potter," said Madam Pomfrey, and then paused as if wondering why Harry was trying not to giggle. "It's what I will bring," she ended firmly, and went towards the fireplace to call a house elf.

Harry squirmed, unsure if he could take food from house elves right now, but just then the doors opened and Draco came in, and he stilled, because Draco would get upset if he raised those scruples now, and it really wasn't worth it.

Why will you listen to him but not me? Regulus said in injured pride.

Harry thought that was ridiculous enough to deserve the jab he gave back. Because he's a much better kisser.

That did, indeed, shut Regulus up.

Albus frowned thoughtfully as he studied Harry through the wards. He'd had the impression of someone vanishing just before he looked in on him again, but if so, it hadn't been someone whose visit had managed to influence the boy unduly. His eyes looked swollen, but

Albus welcomed that. Keep him emotionally off-balance, and then he would not question his sudden inclination to visit Lily again.

Albus watched a longer time, and was pleased to see that every time young Mr. Malfoy brought up the issue of where Harry was going to spend the summer, or made some supposedly casual remark about Harry staying at Malfoy Manor, Harry slid smoothly away from it. He didn't address them if he could help it, and other times he was so neutral as to soon send the easily bored Malfoy onto other topics of conversation.

Good. That is the way to do it. Let anyone suspect the truth beforehand, and we would not be able to move him in time. I will summon Lily to come back three days from now, when Madam Pomfrey has said he may leave the hospital wing. We will whisk him away before either the Malfoys or Severus get ideas.

It might be that he didn't have to worry about Severus, though, Albus would admit. The man had been looking into a Pensieve and writing most of the time lately. Albus could see that much, though he could not tell what Severus was writing; the errant professor had exiled Hogwarts's wards from his rooms almost entirely and woven his own.

And, as more good news to be added to a surfeit of it, it seemed that Fawkes was trying to reconnect with him, creeping back bit by bit. Albus didn't try to rush it, didn't hurry him. He just let images of the phoenix flash across his mind whenever they could be persuaded to enter, and the rest of the time worked in happy silence, content with his visions of the Light becoming strong.

Narcissa stepped carefully into Wayhouse and looked around once. The changeable house had a knothole in the wood above the main staircase. Narcissa paused, looking at it, and then walked up the stairs and further into the house. Cousin Arcturus's distinctly odd sense of humor for once failed to materialize, and she did not go sliding down the stairs to land in an ungraceful heap at the bottom of them, or begin dancing a jig that she could not calm.

When she reached the reading room at the top of the stairs, she found one of the boxes from which she had taken certain small treasures on her last visit to Wayhouse shifted a few inches to the left. Narcissa paused again, and let her fingers brush across the top of the box, wiped free of dust. It might only have been the house's whim, of course, which had lowered the wards in the first place and would insure that some parts of it were clean and others dirty at a moment's notice.

Narcissa didn't think it was.

She let a smile play across her lips, and ducked out of the reading room and into a low-ceilinged sitting room. She had come to the house only for the Transfigured Regulus. She must remember that. She knew where the nursery was, and it would be the work of a moment to levitate the toys and float them after herself. She was sure that no one would have disturbed those. Ingenious of the Dark Lord, really, to make Regulus a common object that might be lost among a thousand others and not a magical one, one that might be touched or disturbed. It might have amused him to keep a traitorous, Transfigured Death Eater in the hands of someone else and see him used constantly, but obviously in this case, a different sense of the fitness of things had ruled.

She had come to the house for that reason, and that reason only.

No, not really. That was the only reason Harry had asked her to come. In truth, Narcissa had another, and she moved lightly through room after room, following a faint trail in the dust, gratified to see that her suspicions were correct.

Of course, she did not take her unawares. A certain kind of silence ceased ahead of her as she passed through Cousin Arcturus's bedroom—his portrait blew her a kiss—and a different kind of silence took its place. Narcissa quickened her pace. The plan hadn't been to take her by surprise.

The plan had been to take her.

She swept into a circular room, oriented around the delicate mosaic on the ceiling, one of planets moving around the sun in an endless waltz. Cousin Arcturus had been ever so proud that he'd known Pluto was there before the Muggle astronomers did, and the three planets he'd discovered and they still hadn't danced merrily in the outer rings.

Of course, the spell came at her from behind, a curse that they'd used again and again in their childhood, one that would cause small sharp pinches all over the skin of whoever it struck. Should the curse continue, the pinches would move inward and start squeezing the heart and lungs—something that was never allowed to happen when they were children and their parents were always just a breathless, frightened scream away.

She chose it because of where we are, Narcissa thought, as she performed the countercurse and turned around. This is a place for family.

"Hello, Bella," she said.

Her oldest sister edged into view from behind the bookcase where she'd hidden, her teeth bared. Narcissa regarded her with a pleasure she had not thought she would feel. When they were children, and her mother had told her in confidence that Bellatrix appeared to have inherited all the madness of both the Black and the Rosier lines, Narcissa had been divided between fear that Bella would hurt her someday, and horror that she would disgrace the family in public. Now, she saw the madness as the beginning of a payment for the debt that Bella owed Harry.

"Cissy," said Bella, her voice a broken echo of its old sweetness. "You're here. You came. You're here."

"I did," said Narcissa, and touched the thing riding in her pocket, next to the Portkey. Exaltation surged and rode her. She had thought she would use it for a different purpose before she cast the Finite Incantatem and watched the glamour of Harry's left hand vanish, but now she had changed her mind. There was no doubt of the appropriate punishment for Bella. "Did you know that I would be here, sweet, sweet Bella? I wondered."

"No," said Bella. "You were already here. Took the weapons, I know." She smiled, revealing a mouthful of cracked teeth, and held up her wand. Her dark eyes gleamed with dazzling excitement. They'd always been her most beautiful feature, Narcissa thought, at least when her long black hair was a rat's nest, like it was now. "Tell me where they are, Cissy. Or, better, come join him. He is the one you should have been serving, if you held to the true ideals. Not like our cousins." Her eyes clouded over with anger. "Not like our sister."

Andromeda had always been Bellatrix's nemesis when they were children, biting her lip and keeping stubbornly silent when Bella tried to hurt her, and then she had delivered the most stinging insult possible: she'd slipped out of Bella's guard when their parents were trusting her to keep Andromeda from eloping with Ted Tonks. Narcissa remembered walking into the room where they'd kept Andromeda prisoner and finding Bellatrix on the floor in a variation of the Full Body-Bind that took eight hours to undo. The next word they'd had was that of their sister's marriage, and then her name had been burned off the family tapestry. Narcissa smiled more widely now, thinking of that, thinking of what their quiet, proud, far too bitchy middle sister would have given to be standing here with her now.

"I hold to the true ideals," she said, and began moving left, so that Bella would think Narcissa was trying to draw her into a dueling circle. "The ideals the Black family had before the Dark Lord arose. This is only one Lord, Bella, you know that, and in the end he'll die like they all die. It's not worth betraying what we are to serve him."

Bella's eyes flew wide, and she shrieked, sending a mouthful of spittle flying. "He is invincible," she said. "He has conquered death. He is my lord, and he is my master."

Narcissa laughed at her. "One invincible lord, defeated by a baby and then by a fourteen-year-old," she said, shaking her head. "Bella, really, I would have thought better of you. At least choose a master that a twenty-year-old wizard alone could have destroyed."

Bella shrieked, and charged her.

Narcissa pulled the weapon out of her pocket. It was nothing, really, if you just looked at it, a small silver coin with an imprint of a wizard's head on one side and the Black family crest on the other—an odd Sickle, perhaps. But Cousin Arcturus had made it, and Cousin Arcturus had had a peculiar sense of humor, and an obsession, in his later years, with the difference between chance and fate. He'd made a weapon that carried both with it.

Narcissa flipped the coin into the air, calling, "Heads!"

Even if Bella recognized the coin for what it was, she was too far gone into madness to stop her charge—or speak coherent spells, for that matter, since she was shrieking threats, instead.

Narcissa whirled aside from her, and ducked behind the bookcase. She watched the coin complete its twinkling tumble, and land on its side, and roll in three circles before falling over with the wizard's head up. Then it gave a brief black sparkle, letting Narcissa know it was ready.

Narcissa waited until her sister turned around and looked at her again. She stared her directly in the eye, and smiled, and said, "What you did to Harry in the graveyard, I wish revisited upon you, threefold."

Black lines of power lashed from the coin, leading directly to Bellatrix's left hand. She began to scream as a line of blood spouted across her wrist, and then an invisible knife began to cut, straight down.

Narcissa leaned against the bookcase and watched, calmly, as muscle tore and parted, as bone appeared, as the magic revived Bellatrix when she would have fainted from the pain, as the incantations Bella had performed must have kept Harry awake to feel the trauma in the graveyard. Draco's letters had hinted only, never being explicit. But they, combined with the fact that Harry's hand was gone and he had certain exceptionally difficult Dark spells wound about the stump, satisfied Narcissa that what she was seeing now approximated the reality of what had happened there.

Only threefold, of course.

The hand sagged free at last, and a flash of fire cauterized the wound. Bella slumped with a low wail of pain as the black magic consumed her hand and soared away into the coin again, lying in a pool of her own blood.

She looked up at Narcissa, and, amusingly, among all the other emotions in her face was a spark of betrayal.

She vanished, Apparating.

Narcissa gave a smile she knew would be faint and distant, and stood away from the bookcase. She could not try to pick up the coin.

Dear Cousin Arcturus and his obsession with the unusual. The coin could be flung by any person of the Black bloodline once, though they had to call out the name of the side they wanted, heads or crest, in mid-flight. If it landed with their side upwards by chance, then their wish was as fate—for that one wish only. Afterwards, if that same person tried to touch the coin again, he or she would simply die. Likewise, someone who tried to touch the coin and didn't share the Black blood would perish.

Narcissa had intended to try and use the coin to persuade one of her reluctant, wavering potential allies to come to Harry's side. She'd toyed with the idea of using it on the Dark Lord, but then remembered that Regulus had been in his service. The Dark Lord had been in the habit of asking questions of any pureblood follower whose family might possess weapons that could hurt him. He would have protected himself against the coin long ago, or else he would have confiscated it without touching it and hidden it away. The fact that it had been in Wayhouse proved he was protected against it.

Narcissa gently levitated the coin behind her. She could no longer use it, but Draco could, or Andromeda, or her niece Nymphadora. And she was certainly not going to leave it here for Bella to find, though Bella had used it already, in her childhood.

She gathered a few more weapons as she made her way through the house, noting the absence of those she had expected to find. Bella would have them, then. Narcissa would mention that to Harry.

She reached the nursery, shook her head at the jumble of toys, and swept them all up in one whirlwind. Then, with them hovering obediently behind her, she reached for the Portkey that would take her back to the Manor.

She landed gracefully in the small library. Lucius laid down his book and looked at her, carefully raising an eyebrow at the jumble of objects floating behind her, but not saying anything.

Narcissa went to him and kissed him hard, without speaking. Lucius laughed soundlessly at her beneath the kiss, and, when she pulled away, took her hips in his hands and looked up at her with an expression combining eagerness and affection.

“Whom did you hurt?” he asked.

“Bellatrix,” said Narcissa, and sat down to tell him all the details. He would enjoy hearing them as much as she had enjoyed seeing them, she thought.

Besides, by telling him about this first, then she would have two enjoyments unalloyed. She would tell him about Harry’s hand next, and the other signs of suffering she had observed, and get the pleasure of watching him go into a rage.

She wondered whom he would swear vengeance against.

She hoped she would get to watch him exact it.

Chapter Sixty-Nine: Trying Again

Snape's world had become a blur of Pensieve memories, of writing so that his fingers were splashed with ink as they usually were with crushed Potions ingredients, of hastily snatched meals and sleep and hasty trips on the sly to look at Harry in the hospital wing. Not even the burning Mark on Midsummer evening had made him as urgent as this. He had the feeling that he was running out of time. He had to finish transcribing Dumbledore's memories of Harry's training from the Pensieve Potion soon. He did not know why, but he must.

"Now, Harry. Sit down on the grass, and we'll tell you a story."

Harry sat down on the grass of the lawn at Godric's Hollow. He was about five or six in this memory, his green eyes permanently wide and taking in information about the world. You wouldn't know that unless you'd known him for a while, though, Snape thought. Already he had learned to hide almost all emotion behind a mask that only truly softened and glowed when his brother was near.

Lily sat down in front of Harry on his right, Dumbledore on the left. Snape moved up to stand between them, and wished impatiently, once more, that this was not a memory. He could take Harry away from this if it were reality. Then Harry might still be this age, and a good deal of the damage that Snape had seen might be reversed.

But it was not to be. Instead, he stood there and watched Lily tell the boy a story, supposedly, her voice soft and hypnotic.

"There was a Slytherin girl who used to torment me, Harry. Charlotte Snoddard was her name, though I used to call her Charlotte Snot-Nose." A fleeting smile played across Lily's face, and then went away, back into the depths of stillness. "She knew that she could get me to cry with just a few words about Mudbloods in the right vicinity.

"But I learned to ignore her. Do you know what I did?"

Harry shook his head, his hair flopping into his eyes. Dumbledore was leaning forward now, as if he wanted to hear Lily's story better—or simply wanted to study Harry's face, and watch him listening to it.

"I learned to turn the conversation back on her," said Lily triumphantly. "I learned to find out about her, where she went and what she did during the day, and then I would ask her about problems I knew she was having, the boys she fancied, the lessons that she missed because she was lazy and often didn't get out of the dungeons until class had already begun. She was suspicious at first, of course, but I never laughed at her, and finally I got her to seek me out and just babble at me about the course of her day. She might open with a taunt, but when I asked her about the things that were important to her, she was more willing to talk about that. Finally, she never used another taunt. I'd moved into another capacity as far as she was concerned, the listening ears. And I was bored, most of the time, but I never cried because of her again."

Lily leaned forward and lightly tilted Harry's chin up. "And that is something that you can do, Harry, if someone asks about you and won't be quiet. You can learn to ask about the things that are important to them, the problems they have and the people they care about. Most people are far more interested in talking than in listening, far more interested in themselves than in you." She paused and smiled. "Especially because you are—"

"Connor's guardian, and guide, and protector," said Harry, with the air of something long rehearsed. "There's no reason for them to be interested in me."

"Very good, Harry." Lily patted his cheek. "So Albus is going to test you and see how well you've learned this particular lesson. When he starts talking about you, turn the conversation back towards him."

Snape had to watch as Dumbledore led Harry through a simple conversation, trying to talk to him about his training, his day, what his favorite colors were, what he liked about the sunlight. Harry was clumsy in return at first, and gave answers that his mother gently scolded him for, but he learned as the afternoon wore on, and managed several smooth transitions that led Dumbledore to talk about his own experiences instead.

Here was the source of much of Harry's evasion, then, Snape thought, trying to keep calm and rational, much of his ability to dodge undetectably around concerns about his health or state of mind. Most people were more interested in themselves than in him, and they were gratified, as well, by the sense that Harry was a sincere and patient listener—something that Charlotte Snoddard could not have been satisfied of with Lily, for all the times Snape had heard her brag about her “pet Mudblood.” They would listen, and talk to him, and reveal more and more of themselves, at the same time that they never noticed Harry was receding from them.

Snape slowly finished writing out the last lines of that memory, and then stared at the parchment, followed by a stare at the bottle of silvery Pensieve Potion.

That was done. That was it. He had transcribed all the memories of Harry's training that he had stolen from Dumbledore.

Snape let out a deep breath, and then began muttering copy spells at the reams and reams of parchment, just in case. He was about a quarter of the way through when someone rapped on the door of his quarters. Snape jerked his head up, glaring. Not many students knew where his private rooms, as opposed to his offices, were, and he knew that Harry and Draco would still be in the hospital wing. This was far more likely to be a professor.

“Come in,” he called, after a tense moment, and dismissed the wards on the door.

To his surprise, the first person who entered the room was Connor Potter, the Gryffindor brat, with McGonagall right behind him. The brat planted his fists on his hips and gave Snape a harsh stare that reminded him, strongly and unpleasantly, of the original Potter. He felt his lip curl back.

“Potter—“

“Severus,” said McGonagall, with a quick nod at him. “A moment, please.” She raised her hand, and writhing gold and red lines draped

his room in Gryffindor colors, encircling them. Snape stared. He had not thought that she had gained that amount of control over the wards.

A moment later, as he watched the wards work their way into the stone of the walls, he was furious. "How dare you!" he hissed at her, standing and reaching for his wand. "I have only just removed the wards so that Albus could not spy on me, and now—"

"He has been spying on Harry, too," said McGonagall, folding her arms and regarding him sternly. "This is the only way to be sure that we'll get a bit of privacy from him. I'll take these down when I leave, Severus, but for now, you are going to leave them where they are."

Snape blinked, then nodded. "And what did you want to say to me?" He gave the boy a harsh glance. "And why did you bring this brat along?"

The brat's face flushed, but he seemed to realize it would be a good idea not to reveal how irritated he was. He took a deep breath instead, and said, "It's about Harry. I got a letter from James. He told me that Harry was coming home to stay with him for the summer. Him and Lily."

Snape felt the explosion of rage in his chest as though it were happening to someone else. He dimly saw one of the Transfigured chairs go flying across the room and smash into his bookshelves as his wandless magic reacted, but it wasn't until McGonagall said sharply, "Severus!" that he was recalled to himself.

Breathing hard, he sat back in his chair and stared at Potter. "You are not lying?"

Potter shook his head. "I'm not. But when we confronted Harry—Professor McGonagall and Malfoy and I—under this kind of ward so that Dumbledore couldn't hear, he told us the truth. Dumbledore put another compulsion on him when he came back from the graveyard, and he was in such physical and emotional shock that it took hold. Harry had an interview with Lily, and he did think that he wanted to go back to either Godric's Hollow or Lux Aeterna with her. But then he broke free."

"He spoke with his mother." Snape could feel his words slur, mostly because his tongue and lips felt numb.

McGonagall nodded. "He did. And, Severus...I have let Mr. Potter tell this story because he knows more than I do, but I would know more. Why do you fear so much to let Harry go home with his parents?" Her eyes were steady, and her arms had assumed a folded posture that meant she wasn't leaving until she got an answer.

Snape nodded towards the paper he'd been copying. "Read those. They're transcriptions of scenes that I got from a Pensieve full of Albus's memories." He turned back to Potter as she started reading. "Go on."

"He told us that he had no intention of going to back to them for the summer, not now," said Potter, with a slight shake of his head. "But he had to pretend to have it, because that would mean that Dumbledore was fooled into thinking him still under the compulsion. And—well. He made Malfoy promise not to tell you about this, because he seemed to think that you might do something to Lily and James." He looked searchingly into Snape's eyes.

"Not myself," said Snape. He had already decided that. His vengeance hung suspended by such a slender thread now, but he knew that the way to break Harry's trust forever and have no hope of regaining it would be to torture Harry's parents himself. "I am going to hand the information about his childhood over to someone else who will be able to use it as it should be used."

"Harry doesn't want anyone to know," said Potter, so softly that Snape could barely hear him.

"I don't care," said Snape. And he didn't, not anymore. The boy could hate him, but he hated him already. And the knowledge that Harry had been in enough trauma to slip backwards that far, to look for comfort in his parents and even accept and believe another of Albus's compulsions for a time...

No. Wait. There is one thing that does not make sense. If he broke the compulsion, why would Albus still be alive? Harry hates compulsion enough to attack anyone who uses it violently. Snape lifted a hand to touch the fading bruises around his throat. I should know that.

"Why is the Headmaster still alive and sane?" he demanded of Potter.

Potter's face assumed an expression of disgust, and that, of all the possible looks he could wear, made him most like his brother. "Because Harry has this mad plan to redeem them," he said flatly. "Dumbledore and Lily, at least, and probably James, too, though he didn't say that. He's confining Dumbledore's compulsion. He wants to talk to them, apparently, and forgive them."

"They can't be forgiven," said Snape, not caring that he was speaking about Potter's mother in that deep tone. "They have hurt him one too many times, and they represent too great a source of temptation and danger for Harry. I will destroy them."

"I quite agree," said Potter.

Snape shot him a sharp glance. The hazel eyes that met his shone with reckless anger and courage. Gryffindor qualities, both of them, but at this moment, Snape supposed, they would serve.

"Where has Harry decided to stay for the summer?" he made himself ask. "And you?"

"I'll be with the Weasleys," said Connor. "Arthur Weasley has friends in the Ministry who helped him strengthen the wards on the Burrow, so that I can stay there and not have to ask for help or permission from Dumbledore." He grimaced. "I think my father assumed I would be staying with him and Harry, but he didn't really ask me, and now I can just say that I made prior plans."

"I almost asked Harry if he would come with me, but I knew he'd refuse. He doesn't want to be around that many people. He doesn't want to stay with you, either," he added, "or with the Seers in their Sanctuary, even though I know they invited him. He doesn't want to

be around people who would make him go backwards, he said. He thinks you focus too much on the past.”

A strangled gasp behind Snape interrupted him before he could reply. He turned sharply, and saw McGonagall lifting her head from reading the records of the memories, a shocked look on her face that could not have been deeper if she had looked into the actual Pensieve Potion.

“They trained him like this?” she whispered. “He suffered like this?”

“Yes,” said Snape.

McGonagall went on staring at the papers for a moment, as though she expected them to rear up and pull her back in. Then she nodded once, and turned to Snape.

“I trust you to take care of this, Severus,” she said. “Harry must never be allowed to return to his parents, and you must make sure that Lily and Albus are punished for their actions.” She closed her eyes. “To think that I once thought them the perfect Gryffindors, the epitome of our House,” she murmured.

The urge came to Snape to say something ridiculous and sentimental then, something like McGonagall being the epitome of Gryffindor now, but he squashed it. Not with Potter in the room. “I plan to show the evidence to those who can take care of it,” he said, and then looked at Potter. “You do realize that word of this will get out and make your life difficult, as well?”

“I would have cared a few days ago,” Potter whispered. “But I survived the Tournament whole and healthy, and Harry...didn’t.” He closed his eyes, and stood there for a long moment, as if debating. Then he sighed, and said, “Harry’s already going to be as mad as hell at me for coming here and talking to you. So I might as well reveal this, too. He’s lost his left hand.”

Snape staggered, and caught himself on the back of his chair. “What?”

“Malfoy told me,” said Connor. “Bellatrix cut it off at the wrist, and made it so that he couldn’t get a replacement. Harry’s wearing a glamour all the time now.” He lifted his head and looked at Snape imploringly. “He wants to hide it. He’s barely told anyone about it. Even Malfoy only found out on accident.”

“I must see him,” said Snape, in a voice that he knew didn’t sound like his own. He was out the door and striding for the hospital wing before either McGonagall or Potter could react.

Snape paused when he reached the hospital wing, because he had no choice. Madam Pomfrey opened the doors to him with a forbidding expression and a slight shake of her head. And more, Harry was tucked into his bed, thoroughly asleep. He was breathing soundly, too, as though the nightmares and visions had finally ceased to plague him.

“Is it normal for him to sleep so much?” Snape had to ask the matron, without taking his eyes off Harry. He wasn’t that short any more, but at the moment, with Snape’s knowledge of his past and his missing hand, he looked small. He tended to make himself smaller, too, curling into corners and ducking to escape people’s gazes and taking any excuse to diminish his own accomplishments.

“Severus,” said Madam Pomfrey, drawing his gaze back to her. “Sleeping curses are difficult to cast or reverse, but they are relatively easy to detect. I’ve found none on Mr. Potter. He simply needs to rest.” Her face softened for a moment. “That’s why he’s spent most of his time in the hospital wing so far. I’ve healed him of the bite on his shoulder that You-Know-Who gave him, but that exhausted him further. And he needs so much more rest than that,” she mused, shifting her hands on the tray of potions that she held. “He hasn’t slept well all year, I know that, and he needs time to recover from what happened to him in the graveyard—time that I know he’s not going to allow himself.”

Snape nodded curtly and moved forward, sitting down next to Harry’s bed. His eyes lingered on Harry’s left hand, and he nodded again. He noticed, now, that there was a callus missing on the boy’s thumb from

gripping his broom that should have been there if his hand was exactly the same as it had been.

He should remove the glamour. He should let Madam Pomfrey make sure the wound isn't infected.

It was difficult for Snape to even think about Bellatrix cutting off Harry's hand. He knew how brutal she was with Muggle and Muggleborn victims, even purebloods who defied their Lord. The thought of what she would do to Harry if she got the chance, and in revenge for removing her right hand as Harry had earlier in the year...

Snape felt a surge of helplessness that was becoming familiar to him. He wanted to snatch Harry up and hold him close against all the wrongs of the world. He wanted to make sure that no one else could ever hurt Harry again. He wanted to force Harry into a set of calm, quiet rooms where he couldn't find anyone else to help or any war to worry himself about, and force him to face his past. He knew that he couldn't do any of those things, and that was coming closer to driving him into madness than anything since his Death Eater days had.

This is what it is like to be a parent, he thought. It's no wonder that I never wanted to be one. But then his eyes went back to Harry's face again, and he shook his head. No, I want to be one now. If Harry will let me.

Harry stirred, just then, and woke. Snape was familiar with that little yawn and the subtle stretching Harry did from this past summer. After seeing the memories in the Pensieve Potion, he knew more about where it came from. Lily had taught Harry to wake slowly and not to let anyone know he had returned from slumber until he was ready, just in case there were enemies lurking nearby. Only after Harry could see no foes in the hospital wing did he relax and roll over.

Of course, he tensed again once he saw Snape.

"Harry," said Snape softly, because there was no way around this. "I know everything." He let his eyes dart to Harry's left hand, and looked up to surprise an expression of sick horror on the boy's face. He tried

to tell himself that it came from anyone, not just him, knowing about that particular weakness, but he couldn't help the hammer blow of rejection that slammed into his gut. "You need not pretend. I want to know why you won't forgive me. I want to know why you can see your mother again, and yet you cannot bear to see me."

There. That would not reveal to the Headmaster's listening ears that Snape knew any of the truth about his compulsion, but it would tell Harry what he needed to know. And, of course, Harry was quick enough to figure out who must have told Snape all of this, from the widening and narrowing of his eyes.

He spoke in a low, furious voice that Snape didn't think owed anything to pretense. "Why should I want to see you again? I don't care that you hurt me. That would have been all right, if you'd just lied to me about something that hurt me. But you put a compulsion on Draco." A brief wind ruffled the curtains of the hospital wing before Harry struggled and got his magic back under control. Snape felt relief, and then shame because of the relief. "You hurt other people," Harry went on, his voice deepening even further. Snape thought he could hear what Harry would sound like as an adult in that voice, and shivered. He would not want to be on the wrong end of this man's wand. "I can't forgive that."

"And your mother hurt your brother," Snape said.

"He's made his own decision on that," said Harry. "He's breaking off relations with her and my father. I think he's crazy—" that would be for Dumbledore, Snape knew "—and he thinks I'm crazy. We're even. But I asked you directly about Draco, and you lied to me." He turned his head away, and Snape was startled to realize, from his harsh breathing, that he was near tears.

He needs rest even more than Madam Pomfrey thinks he does.

"Harry?" Snape asked quietly. "I know that I have done worse things than lie to you. Your mother has done worse things than lie to you." Gone without touching you for two months, trained you to despise soft and pleasant things, told you that not passing one of her tests

meant that you should feel shame for the rest of your life...“Why is this so unforgivable?”

Harry remained still for a moment. Then he turned back, and his eyes were too bright, and Snape knew he was getting the unvarnished truth.

“Because you mean more to me than she does, goddamn you,” Harry whispered. “Of course it hurts more.”

Snape stared at him, and hardly cared that Fawkes had just exploded into being over Harry’s head, chirping worriedly, or that Harry closed his eyes and went rigid as if his mind were reaching out to some distant target. He was too busy dealing with the knowledge that he had not sacrificed Harry’s love and respect.

Not yet.

Harry sat like that, barely breathing, for a few moments, until he opened his eyes, and sighed, and came back to himself. “It’s all right,” he said. “We turned his suspicions away, changed his memory a bit. He won’t be paying attention to this conversation for the next few minutes, so we can talk freely.” He leaned forward, and looped his arms around his knees, and stared at Snape. “I’ve seen, now, what you can do,” he said bluntly. “What you would do. And I know what my summer would be like if I stayed with you. You’d try to force me to focus on the past, wouldn’t you?”

“I would help you heal, yes.” Snape forced his reeling emotions back under control, as well as the idea that he could not possibly do anything else that would push Harry away from him. He might have to. Parents had to do many things that their children didn’t like, and so did guardians. “You can alter the future, Harry, but not the past, and that is why it will chain you until you face it and change your feelings about it.”

“You sound like one of the Healers at St. Mungo’s.” Harry shook his head, his hair bouncing. “No. I’m not staying with you.”

“But you are not as angry at me as you pretended to be,” said Snape.

“Not once my emotions settled down, no.” Harry tilted his head to the side. “The sleep helps. But you did endanger Draco’s life, and you did lie to me, and I know that you might do the same things again if you really thought it was necessary to protect me.”

“There is nothing I would not do to protect you,” said Snape, and, with regret, he saw the path they would follow for the rest of their conversation, stretching away before them. He saw where it led, and it was a hard and bitter thing, to know that he would have to walk it after all, to make the sacrifice of Harry’s good will that he thought he had already made.

It is a bitter thing, he thought, for a man not to know himself and his own reactions to intense pressure. I believed I would bear this far better than I have borne it.

Harry nodded. “I understand that.” He let his breath hiss between his teeth. “But some of those things would interfere with the war, and others would break down this resolve that I’ve been building. I might find that I hate my mother far more than I do right now, if I dwelt on all that she’d done to me.”

“And yet you’re determined to ignore it,” Snape summed up. No, this is not the Harry I thought I would be dealing with. “You’re determined to use this anger of yours at my actions to force yourself away from me and go about the business of the war.”

“Yes.” Harry tilted his head. “I won’t pretend that it doesn’t hurt. Of course it does. But I know you now, sir, better than I did. And I can’t let someone like you be my guardian. You would...guard me too closely. You would prevent me from forgiving Dumbledore and Lily, which I have to do. You might still let your grudge at James make you react in inappropriate ways.”

“Not that last,” said Snape. “Never again.” I hate this road far more than any I have walked, and yet I will proceed to the end.

Harry examined his face, then shrugged a little. “Maybe not,” he agreed. “But we have different priorities. You know me too much and

too well. My other allies will follow me because they don't know everything you do. And I'm not going to tell them, either," he added, as Snape opened his mouth. "And you aren't, either, because you know I would never forgive you if something happened to Lily because you, oh, let the wrong bit of information out of your mouth in front of Hawthorn."

Harry. You think your forgiveness matters more to me than seeing you safe, and content, and happy. It does not. On this, you have very, very badly underestimated me.

Or perhaps he was simply relying on what he knew of the past Severus Snape, Snape thought, watching Harry's eyes shine as he steadily laid down the truth he understood. That was perfectly plausible. Snape had only recently acknowledged his own change.

"So this is the way it will be," Harry was saying. "I go where I have to go for the summer—"

"And that is?" Snape cut in.

"I don't know yet," said Harry impatiently. "Someplace where I can still fight the war, and still forgive Dumbledore and Lily. With people who won't press me too much. Someplace where I know that I can do what I have to do." He stared directly into Snape's eyes for a long moment.

"Maybe, someday," he whispered, "we can reconcile. I told you the truth. Because I understand what you did and why you did it, I'm already partly reconciled to you. But I'm not going to forgive you, not now, because then you would feel that you had license to do whatever you wanted. And I can't let you do that." He paused. Then he said, "I think you understand me now. Necessity, not choice, is forcing me into this. So I'll tell you something that would otherwise have come as a surprise. I'm going to write Scrimgeour and ask him to strip you of legal guardianship of me in a few days."

Snape closed his eyes.

“And who will be your legal guardian instead?” he forced himself to ask.

“I don’t know yet,” Harry repeated. “I’ll find someone.”

“Why?” Snape heard his own voice say, when he had meant to say something distinctly different. “Why are you doing this?”

He looked at Harry. Harry had his head tilted slightly to the side, his eyes steady and bright and full of regret.

“Because even after everything, even knowing you lied to me, and how much that hurt, and even knowing that you endangered Draco’s life, I still don’t trust myself,” said Harry evenly. “I could still forgive you, and that would mean that I’d give you back power over me. I’d do things like maybe hate Dumbledore and Lily again, because you could persuade me into it. So I’m going to make sure I don’t have an excuse for that.”

Snape felt a snarling revulsion curl up inside him, and closed his eyes. No one should be that in control of his own emotions, so willing to abandon those he loves. Of course, I know why he is like that.

“I am going to have Draco at my side,” said Harry calmly, “from knowing myself, and him. I can’t go through this without him—I love him too much—and he wouldn’t leave anyway. But he’s going to have to be enough, along with my allies. You—” Harry’s voice broke for the first time. Snape did not look at him. “You are too much. There’s no way I can accept parenting from you. I can’t accept the kind of healing that you want to give me, either. It would take too much time. I’m sorry, but I’ve made my decision, and that’s the way it has to be.”

They sat in silence for a moment more, and then Snape asked the question that had been haunting him. “Would you really ever go back to Lily?”

“Only to forgive her, and help her heal,” said Harry softly. “That is the only reason.”

“But as long as she lives, she is a danger to you,” said Snape. “At the very least, she might try to gain custody of you again if you have no legal guardian.”

“She is not a danger to me anymore,” said Harry. “She’s small and broken. She only has the power over me that I permit her to have.”

You are wrong, very wrong, about that, or you would never have folded under the compulsion for as long as you did, Snape wanted to say, but he did not say it. “And Dumbledore? He is neither small nor broken.”

“But I’ll forgive him,” said Harry, the impatience creeping back into his voice. “I’m handling him. I’ll do it—“

Fawkes chirped, and Snape knew Dumbledore was again listening.

“Go away, Professor,” said Harry, sounding brisk, but unable to keep out a tone of gentleness. “You know what I’m doing, and why. Go away.” From the sound of it, he had rolled back over and burrowed into his blankets.

Snape stood and walked away from the hospital wing, slowly opening his eyes, his mind a torrent of emotions.

He had thought Harry hated him. It seemed he did not. He had thought Harry incapable of forgiving him. It seemed he was not.

And now he would have to damn that love and that forgiveness, because when Harry saw what Snape meant to do with the memories of his past, they would undoubtedly crisp and blacken and burn.

But as long as his mother lives free, she is a danger to him. So long as most of the wizarding world still respects Dumbledore, or thinks him guilty of no worse crime than senility, he still has too much power.

So long as Harry refuses healing, he will be crippled, and in his mind far more so than in his body.

It had been easier to contemplate this when he thought that he already possessed Harry's hatred.

Snape lifted his head. He had thought that it was better for Harry to laugh and hate him than it was for him to love him and be silent, hadn't he? He thought it was better for Harry to live healed, even if that meant that Snape gave up all claims to any thought of reconciliation or forgiveness in the future.

With eyes open, knowing what would happen the moment his plan came to fruition and Harry heard of it, he stepped onto his road.

Neither of us were born for the easy way.

Interlude: The Invitation

To: Peter Pettigrew

June 25th, 1995

Dear sir:

While we have not often corresponded, and you may indeed be surprised to receive a letter from me, I think I am right when I say that we have a common interest in Harry Potter, and in seeing that Albus Dumbledore receives justice. Not vengeance, not mercy, but justice.

I have seen the Pensieve record of your trial; I requested it from the Ministry two years past, and saw the events that transpired in it. I have never been in doubt, even before Harry informed me of the true state of affairs, about your trial being mishandled. Now that I know you were wronged, I would like to extend an invitation to you.

Albus Dumbledore shall soon find himself called to justice for his monstrous mistakes in handling Harry Potter. It is only right that he should also be called to justice for what happened to you. Will you return from your exile and testify against him?

I am not asking you to do this for my sake, or even for Harry's. But it is because of him that I dare to write to you at all, and to ask for a final cutting out of suffering as an end to all suffering. We have other common bonds I might call upon—we have both worn a brand on our left arms that identified us, for the rest of time, in the eyes of the world—but I would like you to make the decision on your own cognizance alone. I have learned some things from Harry, though he does not think I have.

I remain, sir,

Severus Snape.

Chapter Seventy: The Clear Sea For Miles On Glimmering Miles

Harry woke with a gasp. He wondered, for a moment, as he lay panting on the hospital bed, whether Voldemort had returned to his full strength and possession of memory, and if he had had a nightmare.

But no, he usually remembered the visions distinctly, and now, he did not feel any blood pouring from his scar. In fact, he lay still, for a long moment unable to remember either the dream or what had awakened him.

Then the sensation came down on him again—the calling voices in his head, relentless as the surf.

Come to us.

Harry shook. It felt as though a cord had lashed to the center of his chest and were tugging him helplessly in one direction. He was half out of bed before he knew it. He did manage to pause once he thought about it, and stood shivering on the cold floor. He still wore pyjamas, and it was not yet dawn.

“Harry?”

Draco’s head poked up, hair mussed with sleep, from the hospital bed that had become his over the last few days. He blinked at Harry, and then shook his head. “Do you need to go to the loo?”

“No,” Harry whispered. The call echoed in his head, stealing his next words, and a longing sweetness surged up in him in answer to it. He made his decision then. He had promised to tell Draco when he might be going into danger, after all. “Something’s calling me.”

“What do you mean, something?” Draco demanded, alert in a moment. “And where were you going?”

“I just got out of bed when you sat up,” said Harry. “That’s why I’m telling you now. I think that it’s going to pull me along whether or not I really want to go.” And now, now he did want to go. There was a taste

in his mouth like water and sunlight mingled, and the imperceptible promise, roaring through the voices, that he would have more of it once he reached the place the voices wanted him to come. "But I want you to come with me."

"Of course you do," said Draco, decisively, and made his way over to him, putting an arm around his waist. "You shouldn't even be out of bed yet." He gave Harry a concerned glance. "Are you sure that you can stand?"

Harry smiled slightly, and used his magic to force strength into his limbs. After several days of lying there with nothing to do but renew the glamour on his hand after Narcissa had taken it off, and blow around the hospital wing when he was angry at Snape, it responded eagerly. "Now I can," he said.

Draco nodded, and, to Harry's relief, didn't raise any other silly objections, like rousing Madam Pomfrey from sleep to tell her something that she could neither prevent nor should have to worry her head about. "How are we going to get there? Apparating?" He blinked and swallowed when he said the last word.

Harry shook his head. "These people still haven't given me a clear image of a place yet. I don't think I can Apparate. It's really just a bunch of voices in my head calling to me, and—"

Come to us!

The summons fell over him, bathing him in a crash, and Harry grabbed tight hold of Draco as he felt it sweep him up. The cord in his chest tightened like a sling, and then he was flung forward, tumbling through space. All the while, Draco followed him, determinedly; Harry almost thought he might have found a way to even if he hadn't had his arms around Harry's waist when the pull came.

Sand crunched under Harry's feet, and suddenly gulls' cries were in his ears, piercingly loud if not piercingly sweet. He stumbled, but the disorientation wasn't even as bad as that from Flooing. He opened his eyes, and the moment he recognized where he was, he managed to stand.

Not far from him, the sea roared and crashed, ran in endless ascending and descending patterns, over the sand of the Northumberland beach where he had come to practice his Midsummer ritual with his father and brother.

“Where are we?” Draco whispered.

“Some place I didn’t expect to come,” said Harry, and reached for his wand, which he always kept in his left pocket now, to be able to draw it more quickly with his right hand. He remembered the letter that Evan Rosier had sent him, about meeting on this beach someday, and was already more than half-sorry that he had obeyed the summons—though he hadn’t had much choice about that—or let Draco come—though he had promised not to leave him behind.

Now that he was here, the voices were silent. The beach faced east, of course, and Harry could just make out the first glimmer of sunrise on the waves. Harry cleared his throat when no one approached or offered any explanation.

“All right, Evan, you’ve had your fun,” he said, making sure to keep his tone light and chiding. “I didn’t bring any blueberries, and I didn’t want to duel you, either, so why don’t we call it even, and I’ll go back to the hospital wing at Hogwarts now?” He closed his eyes and remembered the outskirts of Hogsmeade, prepared to Apparate both himself and Draco back.

“Harry.”

Draco’s voice stopped him. It was soft, a bare whisper, but not frightened. Harry would have Apparated in an instant if it were.

He opened his eyes, and followed Draco’s pointing finger—not to one of the slight hills behind them that might have hidden a Death Eater, but out to sea. Harry turned, following it, not sure what he was supposed to see.

In fact, for long moments he saw nothing. The foam just barely reflected back the golden light, glimmering and casting sparks as it

dashed itself to its death on the sand. The waves themselves were picking up strength and speed, seemingly as Harry watched; he thought the tide was coming in.

Then he saw two specks of foam that formed a glittering silver mirror, not a golden one. Harry squinted, trying to make it out, but it ducked behind the crest of another wave. He took a step nearer, though he had to drag Draco along; he seemed warily fascinated, but not enough to let go of Harry's waist and let him stand on his own.

Harry heard the hum of sweet voices in his head then, not words, but wordless music that reminded him of—something, something he could not quite grasp or comprehend. He blinked. He listened, but the symphony did not rise much higher, and then he had something else to distract him.

The silver glint returned, and reformed, and this time Harry could see a long spread of light taking form and shape. A head of hair was riding in the foam, keeping shape even as it was jostled by the incoming tide.

Then shots of white in the gray water gathered together, and shone like legs, and coalesced into them. The silver hair rose, and shook. Light lashed down from the rising sun that seemed to spin a head into existence.

And a unicorn came out of the sea.

The song exploded inside Harry's head. He found himself falling to his knees as the unicorn's hooves hit the sand with the sound of small bells. A powerful stallion, he stood there a moment, shaking the foam from his horn, and then made his way towards Harry in a high, floating trot.

Harry blinked back tears. He didn't know if it came from the music in his head, a chorus of flutes backed by song such as he knew, now, that the sun and the moon sang, or the sight of the unicorn, or the warmth of Draco's arm around his waist as he sank down beside Harry, overwhelmed.

Or the sudden knowledge in his head, which took the form of a quotation he had once read in an old book on magical creatures.

The unicorn is the oldest enemy of the serpent.

The stallion had come to a halt in front of him by now, and stood watching him with eyes like stained glass.

When the serpent comes to drink from the pool and release venom from his sly mouth into the water, all the animals await the coming of the unicorn. He always appears, the next night, and with him always comes the moon, even if that night the moon has turned her face from earth. He plunges his horn into the pool, and the healing light spreads from it—for the unicorn's horn is proof against all poison—and the water is pure and clean again.

The stallion bowed his head, and the same gently irresistible force that had compelled Harry to come in the first place lifted his arm high now.

His left arm, with the glamour at the end of it, which vanished as the unicorn's horn approached it, unable to stand against the honesty of a creature of such pure Light.

Harry watched the tip of that horn brush the stump of his severed wrist. A star of radiance at once sprang up, rippling across his wrist like the flow of moonlight across a still pool. It wrapped tight, and Harry could see strands of poison-green and black floating in it, gathered by the silver coils of the unicorn's magic.

The power, pure and tainted alike, flowed back to the unicorn. The stallion gathered them on his horn and held his head high for a moment, whipping his mane behind him. Harry could see how the sun illuminated and thus diminished the spells that Bellatrix had put on his arm, making them seem small and not so much troublesome as pitiful.

He did not think the unicorn had taken them all, but he had taken a good number, and as Harry watched, he whirled, slinging the Dark incantations from his horn into the sand. Then he raised his left hind hoof and stamped on them, crushing them to death. Harry watched

the axe-like hoof cleave the curses apart, and saw them try to attack the unicorn, and saw how they dissolved and ran away, melting into the sand and harming nothing and no one any more.

The song in his head soared to a fever pitch of triumph.

The sun was rising.

The stallion came near again, and bowed his head near to Harry's chest, reminding Harry of that moment in the forest in autumn when he had thought he would die of a horn in the heart. This time, though, the horn simply brushed the wound from Voldemort's bite, and it shone and closed a little more.

Then the unicorn dropped to one knee in the sand, more graceful than any horse alive, and turned his head to fix Harry with a shining eye.

Harry would have refused what he thought the stallion wanted, but one didn't refuse a look like that. Carefully, he worked his way away from Draco—who, staring in silent awe, didn't protest—and climbed, his hand fisted in the unicorn's mane, onto his back. If his pulling gave any pain, the stallion showed no sign of it.

Then he rose and began to canter along the edge of the sea.

Harry had, somehow, not thought that riding a unicorn would be very different from riding a horse. He had never realized that he would have the opportunity, but if someone had asked him, then he would have shrugged and said that it must be much like a horse, mustn't it?

But it was not. The strength of the rolling muscles under him was more like a dragon's, as though every movement could as easily be a preparation for flight, for a dance, for the rising into light that Harry had seen the unicorns do when he freed them, as another step. The skin beneath his gripping legs was incredibly soft, a softness that silk could only aspire to, and as warm as the coming sun. The sounds of his hooves, quiet though the bells rang on the sand, mingled with the music in Harry's head until he had to close his eyes against it, and against the light shining off the stallion's horn.

The unicorn changed to a gallop. Now they were truly running, and Harry could feel the speed piercing through the shadows in his mind, shoving aside the justifications and explanations that he had given himself and everyone else, striking down and severing the cobwebs he had hung up to guard the truths he wanted to hide from the truth.

He suspected, then, why the unicorns had brought him there, but it was far too late to withdraw or shout that he wanted down.

Gleams of light to the side caught his attention, and when Harry turned his head, he saw other unicorns running there: pretty young mares, another stallion with long, shining silver scars down his flank that he wore with pride, foals with horns barely sprouted and eyes still large and trusting. They all carried with them that blaze that transfigured other people, lifting them to the same glorious height as the unicorns ran on, if only for a little while.

On and on they ran. And the lies and deceptions in Harry's mind collapsed and burned and tore themselves apart.

The stallion wheeled abruptly, and then Harry heard his hooves stop ringing. They had risen in flight, he realized, and were burning out over the sea like a low, silvery comet.

Harry wrapped his arms around the unicorn's neck and bowed his head. Tears were burning on his cheeks. He'd tried to resist them for so long, but they were coming out now, and he didn't think that he could stop them until he had wept them all.

It helped that he wasn't crying simply from sorrow or self-pity, but from the exaltation of the beauty all around him.

The stallion dipped down, and then they landed on a sunlit wave and dropped gently into it. Harry could feel the seawater soaking his pyjama legs, though with the unicorn's warmth beneath him, it wasn't cold. The other unicorns accompanied them, playing in and out of the waves, piping music through their horns and singing back and forth in joy that Harry didn't think any human could ever quite understand, because no human would ever be that innocent.

I'm not, he thought, but he didn't try to stop the tears, because he understood it would do no good.

The stallion swam with him directly towards the sun, and Harry tilted his head back, feeling the warmth sear into and strike and bedazzle him. And the tears continued coming to the surface, and along with them came shame and regret, grief and guilt over the deaths of Dragonsbane and the little boy, self-loathing and self-denial, drawn out of him like the poison they were and absorbed harmlessly into the vast wash of beauty and purity and water around him.

The words he could not have faced at any other time echoed in his head now, given gentleness by their surroundings.

If sacrifice is not the way anymore, Harry, then why do you still insist on sacrifices? Why do you demand things from yourself that you would never demand from anyone else, that you would think them mad and sick to demand from others?

Harry took a deep, hiccupping breath, and answered from the center of that knot of tightness in the middle of his chest that he always felt when he cried.

I don't know.

The uncertainty swept him up and dissolved the knot. Harry fell forward, and the unicorn's mane crept like tendrils of sweet mist around his face, filling his nostrils with more than the scent of flowers, making him faint with the glory of it.

You are part of the reason that this beauty is back in the world again, said that voice that might have been his and might have been the voice of the magical creatures swimming, utterly free, around him.

I know.

A pause, and then the voice said, gentle even as it pushed, You might act more like it, sometimes.

Harry covered his face with his hand, but it didn't really help. He knew the light was still there, and the unicorns, and the sea, vast miles of it, more beautiful and more relentless than any magic, immortal and terrible.

And the unicorns, who judged him, who could judge him if anyone could, and did not find him wanting.

The knot broke apart, the hatred at the center of it—for his failures in the graveyard, for what had been done to him, for what he had done in consequence of it—gone at last, and Harry breathed.

He lifted his head, and removed his fogged glasses. The sun still blinded him, but the softer glow from the white coats of the unicorns—not at all like the gleam of polished snow he had once thought it was—and the shine from his own soul, steady and green-gold through his skin, calmed him.

He could do this. He could go on.

And some things were not his fault.

Harry closed his eyes. He knew that the unicorns would turn around, eventually, and carry him back to Draco. He knew he would have to answer questions, and resist some more badgering to go to Malfoy Manor, and that Draco would want him to Apparate them back to Hogwarts at once. He would have to endure fussing from Madam Pomfrey, too, for breaking his promise not to leave the hospital wing.

And beyond that was the harder road, peppered with uncertainties: about where he would stay with the summer, about who would become his new guardian, about how he could fight the war against Voldemort without losing himself to hatred and rage, about how he was going to deal with things like Lucius knowing about the loss of his hand.

But he thought he could walk that road. He need not know everything, not right away. There was this abeyance, this pause of sweetness, before he fell back into the madness of it.

Around him, the sun blazed, and shone, and flared, and the sea rose in the morning, and the unicorns swam, beauty that had come dancing up to him, fearless, because it knew that he would never try to chain or hold it or prevent it from dancing away again.

For a moment, in which he rested, both freedom and peace coalesced for him.

For a moment, there was only beauty, and light, and the clear sea for miles on glimmering miles, and his heart was still with wonder.

The sun was rising.